

## Of Love

That day, Yosuke Matsuoka arrived at the office at twenty past nine in the morning. He had ten minutes until the senior management meeting started. Since he had not been able to attend the daily morning meeting, he had his subordinate, Shinozaki, brief him quickly before he beelined for the conference room.

This was just another regular scheduled meeting, and there was nothing to report this time from the sales department. Matsuoka half-listened to the usual routine of announcements as he ducked his head and yawned furtively from time to time, readjusting his seat. It was hard sitting straight.

Every time he felt the stinging in his lower parts, his night with Motofumi Hirosue flashed back in his memories, which was a mild inconvenience. The sensation of his passionate kiss, the hesitant fingers up his back, the sound of the man's breath catching at his ear—just the memories were enough to make his whole body burn up from its core.

“—Hey.”

He was brought back to earth by the voice of Saijo, who was the same age as him and the section manager of General Affairs. The people around them were getting out of their seats and heading for the door in a scattered fashion.

“Are you spaced out? The conference is over.”

“Oh. Right.” Matsuoka hastily got up, and felt the stinging of his lower regions spread to his entire body. It was hard to shake off this strange sensation, which was both painful and ticklish. But it made him happy to think that this was Hirosue's lasting mark on him. He was beyond help; he even thought so himself.

“It's rare to see you so dazed like that.” As they walked down the hall, Saijo raised both arms and stretched. His stint as a rugby player in university showed in his sturdy physique. His mindset was also very sportsmanlike. For someone who had been promoted to a senior position at a young age, he was not snobbish or two-faced, and was a comfortable man to be around.

“Your mind still stuck in the weekend?”

Matsuoka smiled wryly. “Maybe,” he said, giving a small yawn. “Maybe I'm tired because I was out all day yesterday.”

His weekend had been a dizzying roller-coaster ride. In just two days, he felt like he had gone through a year's worth of emotional ups and downs. The reunion with the man he used to love—Hirosue's words had put Matsuoka at their mercy as he dragged Matsuoka to one place after another before telling him, at the very end, that he loved him.

Matsuoka had always wished for those words—wished that the man would love him. But when he was finally given the sweet confession, Matsuoka was unable to take it at face value. He had already been rejected twice, and he knew that Hirosue was indecisive by nature. Matsuoka was apprehensive; he figured that Hirosue had only confessed his love in the moment, and later he was bound to say, “Never mind.”

Matsuoka invited the man to bed with the intention of restoring Hirosue's senses as soon as

possible. He also did not want to keep his hopes up. But contrary to his expectations, Hirose had no problem touching his male body. There was nothing violent in his actions, and he was gentle until the. The fingers that ran over his body and the words he spoke were almost unbelievably loving.

Despite his caution, Matsuoka found himself drowning in the swirl of emotions, which flooded and rose quickly above hazardous levels. Even at the office, the memories of their naked bodies in erotic acts overlapped his thoughts. He remembered the soft touch on his cheek. Even that was enough to arouse him and make his ears feel hot.

"Where did you go in such hot weather?"

"Huh?"

"You said you went out yesterday."

Saijo looked surprised when Matsuoka told him the name of the far-flung city where he had spent time with Hirose.

"Was this on a business trip?"

"No. Personal."

"What did you go all the way out there for?"

Matsuoka could not say that he had been dragged onto the bullet train by the man he loved—much less that he had endlessly had sex with the man and come back this morning.

Saijo appeared to sense something more and pelted him with persistent questions. Matsuoka dodged him and returned to the office. He took care to sit gently in his chair, but he felt himself throb at the centre, making him conscious of a man who was not around.

He was aware of the pile of documents on his desk, but Matsuoka first took his cell phone out of his suit pocket.

There was no reply to the e-mail he had sent from on the bullet train. He knew Hirose wasn't the kind of man who would e-mail him if he knew he was at work, but he still felt a little disappointed.

That time, he had been so desperate to convey his feelings that his message had been a rambling mess of phrases like "I want to see you" and "I want to see your face". Upon reflection, it all sounded rather feminine and childish. Now, he couldn't stop wondering whether Hirose thought he was immature.

All the time that Matsuoka had spent harbouring one-sided feelings had ended with a ruthless rejection. Matsuoka had severed all methods of contact between them, so he had figured they would never meet again. But in one night, they had gone as far as to have sex and become lovers. He still couldn't wrap his head around what happened or how, and it still felt like he was dreaming.

Matsuoka switched his phone off vibrate mode and took a small breath. Perhaps it was because he had dashed up so many metaphorical stages of a relationship at once; even when he was alone, he found himself restless. He figured he should start on his work, and reached for the documents in his inbox.

"Chief."

He looked up to see Uemura in front of him. She was the assistant chief, a woman with short hair.

"Do you have a minute? It's about Daito Company."

Matsuoka had formerly been in charge of Daito Company, and had transferred the job to Uemura after he became promoted to section chief. Even though he had given her numerous precautions about the trickiness of their contact, the troubles never ceased. He had hoped the contact would be at least a little forgiving towards a female employee like her, but apparently that was too much to ask.

Matsuoka offered to have her switched out with someone else, but Uemura declined.

"I'll keep at it for a bit longer and see what I can do," she said resiliently. After they finished their discussion, Uemura asked him an abrupt question.

"Did something good happen?"

"Uh, not really. Why?"

"You just seem really happy."

Matsuoka could only smile wryly. He took some documents in hand after Uemura went back to her desk, but he still could not concentrate. It had been hours since they parted, but his skin still tingled. He wasn't in that hotel room anymore, nor was he being touched, but the memories kept coming back vividly.

Matsuoka fished his cigarettes and lighter from his drawer and left the room. At the end of the hallway was a smoking area, with a ventilation fan and plastic partitions extended halfway from the ceiling. He had second thoughts about taking a break at such an early hour of the work day, but he knew he wouldn't get any work done at this rate.

To avoid the discomfort in his lower half from sitting, Matsuoka leaned against the wall instead as he smoked.

"Chief, are you here for a smoke, too?"

His subordinate, Shinozaki, also came into the smoking area. He was a head above the rest of the sales workers in terms of the amount he smoked. Matsuoka thought it was a little too early for him to be taking a break, but as the equally-guilty boss, he couldn't make any complaints.

"Aren't you going to sit?" Shinozaki glanced sideways at Matsuoka leaning against the wall.

"I'm going to head back soon, anyway."

"Excuse me, then," Shinozaki said as he sat down on the bench. They could see the sky through the window at the end of the hallway, and it was cloudy outside. It had been sunny in the early morning hours. Matsuoka idly wondered how the weather was out west.

"Say, Chief, you were scrambling around quite a bit this morning, weren't you? It's so rare to see you come in late."

Matsuoka tapped the ash off his cigarette into the ashtray. "I overslept," he said.

"Whatever you were doing must have kept you up all night yesterday," Shinozaki said slyly with narrowed eyes. "Enough to make you oversleep, am I right?" He was absolutely right, but Matsuoka didn't feel like entertaining his joke by affirming it.

"Who knows?" he said, shrugging and putting the cigarette to his lips again.

"Chief, you really do have a girlfriend, don't you?"

Until now, Matsuoka had always said he didn't have a girlfriend, because it was true. But if he was going to start dating Hirotsue, it would be a hassle if girls continued to approach him like they had done before. Shinozaki was talkative and not very good at keeping secrets. If Matsuoka told him,

the whole office would know within the day. Perhaps this was a good opportunity.

"I guess you can call it that," Matsuoka affirmed.

"I knew it," Shinozaki said enthusiastically, biting his bait. "I think it was weirder to see you *without* a girlfriend until now, Chief. But you'll make your fans cry. I think some girls are pretty serious about you. So, does your girlfriend work at this company?"

"No comment."

"I won't tell anyone, I swear. Please?"

Matsuoka looked at the ceiling.

"She's a normal person."

Shinozaki pouted sourly. "Everyone's normal."

"She's a gentle, indecisive worry wart. And that's the end of this topic."

"Aww," Shinozaki groaned in dismay, but he did not pry any further. Although he was unreserved and informal, he still knew where to draw the line.

"Girlfriends are nice, but don't you find them kind of bothersome sometimes?" he murmured. If Matsuoka remembered correctly, Shinozaki was in his second year of dating a girl in a branch company. "She keeps pestering me to take her places on our days off. When I tell her I'm tired and I want to rest, she gets in a bad mood and says I'm being cold to her lately. Obviously I was trying harder when we first started dating—everyone does, right? But I can't keep that up forever."

Shinozaki let out a billowing puff of smoke.

"On top of that, these days she's started telling me to smoke less. I figured she was fine with it since she never said anything, but apparently it's always bothered her. I'm already stressed enough at work. I can't stand being suffocated around my girlfriend, too."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about that, I guess."

Matsuoka, who had been tossing back a half-hearted response or two, glanced at the pack of cigarettes he was holding. Before, he hadn't smoked that much. He had started smoking more after Hirosue had gone back to the countryside.

Hirosue did not smoke. The one time he did, he had choked quite badly. He had never mentioned that Matsuoka's smoking was a problem. But seeing as how he didn't smoke himself, he probably didn't like it especially, either.

"Have you smoked this before?" Matsuoka showed the pack to Shinozaki.

"It's pretty good. I like it."

"Then you can have it. There's still half of the pack left."

Matsuoka tossed the pack at him, and Shinozaki caught it nimbly with one hand.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"I decided to quit smoking."

"What? No way, don't one-up me!"

Matsuoka laughed as he left the smoking area. He never stocked up on smokes, so those were the only ones he had. He would throw his lighter away. He would stop smoking.

He wanted to get rid of any part of him that Hirosue might find unpleasant.

Matsuoka had told Hirosue to meet him at Tokyo Station, since Hirosue didn't know where his new condo was. The bullet train stopped at there, and it was also Matsuoka's transfer station. It seemed perfect. But Matsuoka had completely overlooked the fact of rush hour. And it was Friday today; the ticket gates near his transfer point was packed with people. The heat radiating from the throng was overwhelming, and a thin sheen of sweat formed on his forehead just from standing still.

Matsuoka had come to the station a little early because he didn't want to keep Hirosue waiting. However, although the bullet train occasionally came late, it never came earlier than the schedule hour. Matsuoka was jostled around pointlessly by the crowd. He carefully looked around him, watching people elbow each other to get out of the ticket gates from the corner of his eye.

He finally found the familiar face. His heart suddenly raced. Hirosue was glancing around as he approached the ticket gates. He had not noticed Matsuoka yet. Matsuoka raised his right hand up high.

Hirosue finally noticed him. His blank, public face broke into a relieved smile as he approached.

"Look at the people, huh?" Hirosue wiped the sweat off his brow with his fingers. He was wearing an unremarkable plaid shirt and jeans, and had a large, navy blue tote bag slung over his right shoulder. They had not seen each other since Monday morning, so it had been four days now.

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking," Matsuoka apologized. "Seven o'clock on a weekday is smack in the middle of the end-of-day rush. I should have chosen another place."

Hirosue shook his head at Matsuoka's apology.

"It's probably crowded everywhere in the station, anyway. And we still found each other without a problem. I've been out so long in the countryside that I totally forgot what it feels like to be in a crowd like this. I was kind of taken aback."

They had been phoning each other every day, and talked for quite a long time, too—about one or two hours. Over the phone, Matsuoka was unfazed if their conversation strayed into bawdy territory, but in person, he felt needlessly nervous.

"Well, how about we go out for dinner to start?" he suggested. "I'm starving. Any particular restaurant you want to go to, Hirosue?"

"I don't know much about the station area, so it doesn't matter where."

"Can we go to the *izakaya* close to my condo, then? It has a nice ambiance."

Side-by-side, they waded through the crowd to get to the subway platform. There were considerably less people compared to the JR ticket gates, but it was packed inside the subway car. As if things weren't already bad, the man standing behind Matsuoka was wearing large headphones that were leaking noisy music. Even with Hirosue right beside him, they were barely able to have a conversation.

They were finally freed from the throng when they got off at the station closest to Matsuoka's condo. It had been hot and humid in the subway car, and outside it was not much different. The breeze was warm and the air was damp.

Hirosue was still untalkative after they had left the noise behind. Matsuoka pretended not to notice and kept up a lighthearted conversation.

"What time did you leave your place, Hirosue?"

"Mm... about three-thirty, I think."

"I know it's Friday and all, but was it okay for you to leave work early?"

"It's only busy in the mornings, anyway."

Their conversation was prone to lapsing since Hirosue did not start any new topics. He had spent over three hours transferring between bullet trains and local trains to get here; perhaps he was tired and didn't feel like talking.

Matsuoka went along with the man beside him and closed his mouth. He had longed to see Hirosue. His heart had been wrung with yearning the moment the bullet train doors closed on Monday morning. He had been so anxious to see Hirosue that he had been fidgety since morning, glancing every few moments at the clock. He had longed so desperately for this moment; now, he felt rather forlorn that their conversation had stalled even though they were finally in each other's company.

The *izakaya* was on a side road off the main street, but that didn't stop it from being full of people. Although the majority of seats were full, the turnover was also quick. They only waited about five minutes before they were shown to a table set up like a private booth.

"The pork stew here is great. The *sunomono*<sup>1</sup> is pretty good, too." As Matsuoka explained the menu, Hirosue leaned in to peer at his hands from across the table.

"Where?" he asked. When he drew up close, Matsuoka could catch a whiff of sweat. Hirosue's scent. Just being conscious of it made his body turn hot. Matsuoka scooted backwards.

"What's wrong?" Hirosue asked.

"Oh... um..."

Matsuoka was surprised to find himself almost turning hard just by the man's scent. If he had been a middle- or high-school student, that would have been another matter. But to become like when he wasn't even being touched—it was cause for bewilderment.

"Are you alright? Your face is red."

He flinched when Hirosue touched his cheek. The man's fingers drew away as if to hesitate at his reaction.

"Oh—no, it didn't bother me. I was just surprised," he reassured the man hastily. Hirosue gave a wry smile. Matsuoka clawed at a hot towel and pressed it against his hot cheek.

He wished he could act normal. They'd eaten together dozens of times before. But his hyper-conscious mind was turning him into an embarrassing mess.

Before—before Hirosue had told him he loved him, Matsuoka had kept a careful distance, making sure he didn't get too close, making sure he wasn't turning the man off with his obvious attraction for him. He avoided romantic topics, and he was careful not to stare too much. He had been doing pretty well.

But as soon as the man told him he loved him, Matsuoka found himself being conscious, expectant, and in an altogether peculiar state. They were going out now: he was allowed to touch the man and look at him. But as soon as he was allowed to, as soon as there was no need for him to hold back, he found himself turning jerky and awkward like a mechanical puppet.

Matsuoka anxiously wondered if he would be alright like this. Even though his body

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1 Vegetables and seafood marinated in vinegar dressing.

responded with desire, he found himself pushing the man away out of nervousness. Would they be able to have sex properly like this?

Matsuoka felt his back burn up. He was embarrassed for naturally assuming that they were going to have sex. Hirosue was going to stay for two nights, on Friday and Saturday. Perhaps they wouldn't do it today.

Their beer was brought, so they gave a toast. The rest of the food was brought at a brisk pace, and Matsuoka focused on eating. Hirosue also ate eagerly. The dishes disappeared from the table in moments.

The food had been polished off so cleanly that Matsuoka wondered if Hirosue was still hungry. He was still wondering if he should order something else when Hirosue spoke up.

"Should we get going?"

Matsuoka looked at the clock and saw that barely an hour had passed. Before, they often stayed at restaurants for close to two hours drinking and eating. Matsuoka was almost sure now that Hirosue was tired and was eager to get some rest.

"Alright," he agreed.

Hirosue paid for their bill. Although Matsuoka offered to split it, Hirosue insisted he would pay since he would be staying at Matsuoka's house for two days. Matsuoka relented to the treat; judging by the atmosphere, he risked putting Hirosue in a bad mood if he refused too adamantly. He didn't want to strain the man's finances more than necessary—it already cost quite a lot of money to take the bullet train here—but as much as Hirosue was mild-mannered, his pride was also easily hurt. Matsuoka had to be careful with his words.

It was a five-minute walk to his condo from the *izakaya*. Matsuoka tried bringing up the topic of Hirosue's favourite nephew, but the thread of conversation did not last long.

This condo which Matsuoka had moved into about four months ago was more spacious than his last one. At the time, he had been driven by a frantic urgency to change his living environment, and had made his decision at the first real estate agent he visited. His rent was higher now, and though it was further away from his office, his neighbourhood was a comfortable one. There was a park and convenience store nearby, and a large supermarket was within walking distance.

Matsuoka thought to himself while they walked in silence. He felt like he was the only one sort of—going around in circles. Hirosue always took things at his own pace, and didn't seem to feel the need to do something with the air between them. Perhaps Matsuoka was the only one who thought this silence was awkward.

They walked through the condo entrance and stepped onto the elevator. Matsuoka stared at his feet. *Honestly, if this is going to continue even when we're alone in my room, it's going to be tough*, he thought.

When they reached the door to his apartment, Matsuoka hesitated to unlock it. But there was no way he could refuse to let the man in now. He opened the door and turned on the lights in the entrance.

"Come on in." He let Hirosue in first, then locked the door. When he turned around, he was suddenly yanked by the arm and pulled into an abrupt embrace. He could smell the faint scent of sweat from the man's neck in front of him.

"H-Hirosue," he stammered.

The sudden closeness made him feel like his heart was about to burst from his chest. His chin was jerked up forcefully as their lips overlapped. The man's right arm drew him closer, and his hot tongue pried his lips apart and slipped into his mouth. The sensation made Matsuoka flinch, and Hirosue's movements froze.

Their kiss was broken, and Hirosue looked down at Matsuoka with uncertainty. Although Matsuoka was surprised to be pounced on with no romantic lead-in whatsoever, he didn't mind. He did not want the man to stop, either. But he couldn't bring himself to ask Hirosue to keep going. It was too embarrassing.

He made his best attempt at communication by sliding his arms up the man's back and drawing him close. Hirosue, who was watching for his reaction, pressed his lips against his again in a deep kiss.

Matsuoka couldn't tell whether he was a good kisser or not, but just knowing that it was Hirosue made him feel lightheaded and disoriented. Matsuoka gasped for breath. Hirosue gently ran his hand through Matsuoka's hair over and over. Matsuoka trembled from the happiness of being touched like this.

"—Mmh—" A low moan escaped his lips, and their romantic moment was rudely interrupted as Matsuoka felt himself being shoved away.

"Huh?" Uncertainty took over at suddenly being abandoned. Maybe Hirosue had been repulsed at his moan. *I shouldn't have made any noise*, he thought. He felt like crying from the regret.

"I'm sorry. I'm so embarrassed at myself," Hirosue apologized. His face was so red, it looked scalding to the touch. "I was planning to do everything in the right order, but I can't control myself at all."

His face was still red as he muttered "oh, yeah," and reached down for the tote bag on the floor to take out a square box about twenty centimetres long.

"I brought a souvenir. It's the most popular item at our factory."

"Th-Thank you."

Matsuoka was genuinely happy for the souvenir. He remembered Hirosue saying over the phone that customers often told them how delicious it was. But "lame" was the only way to describe how he looked right now, in this situation, holding a box of shaved bonito flakes.

The charged atmosphere instantly deflated. Not quite knowing what to do with the box in his hand, Matsuoka opened his mouth.

"Do you want some coffee?" he asked Hirosue.

He sat Hirosue down on the sofa in the living room before heading to the kitchen to make coffee. While he waited for the water to boil, Matsuoka had a serious mental debate about whether he should sit across from or beside Hirosue. Sitting beside him seemed too obvious and brash. But sitting across from him seemed distant.

When Matsuoka placed the coffee on the table, Hirosue thanked him. After much deliberation, Matsuoka sat beside him while leaving a little distance. There was still no conversation between them. Matsuoka had no idea what to talk about, especially with the awkward mood between them which carried an underlying suggestiveness. Hirosue wore the gravest expression he had ever seen as he



drank his coffee.

Matsuoka didn't care if he was called materialistic or preoccupied with sex; to be honest, he felt like going to bed. Admittedly, it was physically straining to be penetrated, but he wanted to be touched and sought after.

Although he could never tell Hirosue this, Matsuoka had bought a new bed yesterday. Once the plans were set for Hirosue to come on Friday, Matsuoka initially thought of buying a guest futon. The bed he had right now was a single; it was enough for one person, but a little cramped for two men. He used to have an extra futon when he used to live with his girlfriend, but he had gotten rid of it when they broke up. As he thought of where to buy the futon, he realized that if he bought a guest futon, they would be sleeping apart.

That night when they had sex properly for the first time, they had been in each other's arms until morning. The heat against his back, the fingers that caressed him lovingly from time to time, were so pleasant it almost made him cry. He wanted to be in the same bed even after they did it. He wanted Hirosue to be close enough to touch when he wanted to, and he wanted to feel the man's touch as well.

Maybe Hirosue had stuck around with him that time because there had only been one bed in the hotel. Unlike Matsuoka, perhaps Hirosue didn't like cuddling after they did it. But there was no way Matsuoka could ask whether Hirosue liked being together after they had sex. He thought of buying an extra futon first, then watching for Hirosue's reaction: if he seemed alright with being close together, he could buy a new bed. But then, that created a whole new problem.

If Matsuoka bought a new bed, a bigger one at that, after they started dating, it was like he was sending obvious signals to Hirosue that he wanted to have more sex. If he was going to make that kind of impression, he preferred to just buy a new bed at the outset.

His bedroom was spacious enough for a double bed. But a double bed seemed suggestive in its own way, so Matsuoka settled on a roomy semi-double bed instead.

"Matsuoka."

He turned around as his name was called. Hirosue beheld him steadily before he slowly lowered his head. His hand reached out slowly to hold Matsuoka's left hand. His palm was searing hot.

Hirosue's heat instantly flowed through to him, and his body turned hot. The man was clearly desirous, but he did not say so. It was maddening. Matsuoka could not hold himself back anymore.

"Hirosue."

The man lifted his face.

"—Do you want to go to my room?" He made the first move. An expression somewhere between happiness and relief crossed Hirosue's face as he gripped Matsuoka's hand back firmly.

He was nervous despite assuming nonchalance; when Matsuoka tried to sit down on the bed, his knees buckled in a strange way. The momentum made him flop backwards onto the bed. *Whoa, that was totally lame.* He was so busy being embarrassed at himself that he was surprised when Hirosue came climbing on top of him.

Did Hirosue think he was trying to be provocative on purpose? Before he could even wonder, he was met with a kiss. He had been worried that Hirosue would find his assertiveness a turn-off. But that disappeared as his attention was swept away by the man's fierce kisses.

Although Hirosue's kisses were bold, his fingers were shaking as he unfastened the buttons of Matsuoka's shirt. It was cute how he was clearly not used to it. This was very much like Hirosue.

Matsuoka began to feel lightheaded as the man bit and sucked his neck hard. If the mark was too high up, he wouldn't be able to hide it with his shirt. But Matsuoka could not bring himself to tell the man to be careful, lest he make Hirosue too conscious and make him stop.

"Oh!"

Matsuoka's spine flinched at Hirosue's voice. He was startled out of the daze he had been lulled into from the man's hungry kisses. A pair of lost eyes looked down upon his pinned body.

"We forgot to take a shower."

Matsuoka had already noticed, but had assumed they were skipping that step since Hirosue had sought him so urgently.

"Um. Yeah. You're right." There was nothing else to say.

"—Let's go take a shower, then," Hirosue mumbled miserably. Matsuoka was already starting to get hard just from kissing, and Hirosue's own member was also starting to take shape against his thigh. He felt like taking a shower would only dampen the mood. This and the incident at the door made Matsuoka wonder, a little snidely, if Hirosue was cockblocking for fun. But in the end, Matsuoka couldn't bring himself to say so.

"It *was* really hot out today," he agreed. "Hirosue, do you want to go first?" He kept his tone light. The man climbed off of him and pulled Matsuoka's right hand to sit him up. There was no answer to his suggestion.

"Should I go first?" Matsuoka asked further.

"It would take a long time if we went one-by-one. How about we shower together?"

Matsuoka's breath caught in his throat. Taking a bath together? He begged to be spared of that. Apart from hot springs, Matsuoka had never taken a shower with someone he dated before.

Not only that, he would be exposing his undeniably male body under the bright lights to a man who had insisted until the end that he could not handle men. Things weren't so visible when they were entangled in bed. But in the shower, his parts would definitely be in plain view.

When they had done it the other day, Matsuoka had reckoned Hirosue would not be able to get it up. But contrary to his expectations, the man touched him, entered him, and said he loved him. Matsuoka was also able to feel arousal for Hirosue, and to sleep with him. But even while knowing it would be alright, Matsuoka still couldn't help having his doubts. He didn't want Hirosue to feel his disgust anew. He didn't want the man to think of him that way.

"My bathroom's not big enough."

Hirosue lowered his gaze in disappointment.

"I... guess so. The two of us in one bathroom would probably be way too crowded." His tone was that of resignation, but he kept clasping and re-clasping Matsuoka's right hand. Matsuoka got the message loud and clear that he still wanted to bathe together. He couldn't ignore that. Matsuoka bit his lip lightly.

"Besides, who knows, you might get disgusted when you see me naked." He spoke lightly so as not to bring down the mood. Hirosue looked at him curiously.

"You were beautiful last time, Matsuoka."

Matsuoka felt his back burn.

"You were way more beautiful, especially compared to someone like me. That's why I want to see."

Matsuoka's lips trembled. His entire body broke into a sweat from the embarrassment. Even in this state, the man still gripped his right hand. He silently begged to see.

"It's alright with me, as long as you don't mind being cramped," Matsuoka said.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Matsuoka said, suspending his cares. What would happen would happen.

Hirosue had said he was beautiful, and that he wanted to see him. As an extension of that, Matsuoka had predicted that there might be some intimate touching or fondling, but he hadn't expected the man to take advantage of their nakedness and let things escalate until he was practically a step away from penetration.

"Ah— ah— ah—"

His own voice reverberated continuously off the bathroom walls. Every move of his arms and legs sent the water splashing and spilling from the bathtub.

It was spacious enough for one, but extremely cramped for two men. The sight of them with their limbs entangled in the bathtub was probably nothing short of ridiculous.

Hirosue's behaviour had been suspicious even when they were just washing. He would embrace Matsuoka's sudsy body and touch him. He was a man who could wait, and he was down-to-earth; yet, his bold suggestion that they bathe together, as well as what he was starting in the bathroom now, was obvious bordering on immodest.

Hirosue even extended his hands to Matsuoka's lower parts while they soaked in the tub. Although Matsuoka tried to pull his hips away, the bathtub itself was small. Also, since he was straddling Hirosue, he could not close his legs.

"Don't touch me down there."

"Why?" Hirosue whispered at his ear. His voice had a tender ring as it echoed in the bathroom.

"I'll get hard if you keep doing that."

"I'd like to see that," Hirosue grinned, and closed his hand around Matsuoka's centre. After being stroked several times underwater, Matsuoka's member took the shape that Hirosue desired. Hirosue still continued to run his hands up and down his shaft, and Matsuoka felt like he was about to ejaculate. When he hastily got to his feet in the tub, Hirosue grabbed his leg.

"What's wrong?"

"Um... uh..."

He realized his erect member was in Hirosue's face, and covered it with his hands without thinking. Hirosue grabbed both his hands and drew them apart. Like a child caught in the middle of a prank, Matsuoka ended up having to expose his penis which Hirosue had brought to full form.

Matsuoka was sure the man also saw that the tip was dripping with a milky liquid that was not water.

"Are you about to come?"

Matsuoka trembled as he gave a shallow nod.

"You can go ahead."

"No. It'll get in the water."

"That doesn't matter."

Large hands cupped his exposed buttocks. He was yanked close. Before he knew it, Hirosue had drawn his wet and trembling penis into his mouth.

Matsuoka stared in stunned shock as the man sucked him. He was speechless with surprise. He had never thought Hirosue could do that to the very embodiment of his manhood. He didn't want the man to overstep his comfortable boundaries, but at the same time, it felt so good he thought his legs would give out. Joy and pleasure raced through his whole body at once, and Matsuoka found himself intensely aroused. His member, already close to the limit, felt like it would burst.

"Stop," he said tensely. "Hirosue, I'm... coming..."

Hirosue would not let go, even if Matsuoka pleaded with him. On the contrary, the man pulled him even closer by the hips and swallowed him down to the base.

"I really can't—I'm—"

He tried to push the man's head away, but he was too late. He ended up releasing himself into the damp, warm cavity.

"I—I'm sorry."

Hirosue's throat contracted slightly as he swallowed. Matsuoka inwardly screamed. He squatted in the bathtub with a splash and clutched Hirosue's face with both hands.

"Sp-spit it out!"

He did not want to leave an even stronger impression of his maleness like this when they had finally just gotten over the barrier of their gender. While Matsuoka panicked, Hirosue licked his upper lip. He was not the most handsome man, but he had an erotic air that made Matsuoka shiver.

"You taste green, Matsuoka."

His embarrassment was blown cleanly away, replaced by a discomfort that made his spine run cold. Matsuoka's eyes watered as he came close to tears.

"What's wrong?" Hirosue asked hastily. *What's wrong is the fact that you did that to me out of the blue*, he thought, but was unable to put it into words. Tears spilled over.

He was dragged close and taken into Hirosue's arms. He found his own arms naturally encircling Hirosue's neck.

"I'm sorry. If you didn't like it, I won't do it again."

The man stroked his wet head. If Hirosue was still embracing him, did it mean he wasn't disturbed by what he just did?

"You don't feel... disgusted, or anything?"

"About what?" Hirosue asked back.

"About doing that kind of stuff."

"When I looked it up on the Internet, I saw it mentioned under foreplay."

Matsuoka looked up at Hirosue in surprise.

"On the Internet?"

"Since I didn't know what I was doing last time," Hirosue explained. "But if you didn't like it, I won't do it anymore."

"I liked it, but... you don't mind, Hirosue?"

"I liked it, too," Hirosue said as the edges of his eyes drooped a little in a smile. "It was fun. The look on your face was so different from usual. —Just licking yours turned me on."

Matsuoka rubbed his cheek up against Hirosue's neck.

"Hirosue, all that stuff on the Internet... those are all just examples. Just because it says so, it doesn't mean you have to force yourself."

"I know. But I wanted a taste. I wanted to see what you tasted like, Matsuoka," Hirosue said simply. It was a shocking statement, yet Hirosue's tone was casual. Matsuoka blushed furiously.

"You don't need to know," he sputtered.

"I might as well find out if I have the chance. I want to know everything about you."

Matsuoka was glad that the man wanted to know more about him. He wished the man would want to know more and more. But when he wondered how erotic the man would become in that process, he was simultaneously a little afraid.

They embraced and made love again and again. By the time they went to sleep, it was close to dawn. When Matsuoka woke, it was close to noon.

His lower half, which had finally begun to feel normal, had been penetrated by Hirosue again. His lower regions now felt dull and numb. He wished the man would go easy on him since he wasn't a girl, but when Hirosue begged for more like a child, Matsuoka could not refuse. He opened himself again and again to Hirosue.

As for the perpetrator who had had his way with Matsuoka, he was still deep in his slumber. Matsuoka peered at his sleeping face. Just looking at him made his chest tighten, and he realized just how in love he was. Those lips, which presently only issued shallow and regular breaths, had repeated the word "cute" to the point of excess last night. Perhaps Hirosue's lack of speaking skill was what contributed to his lack of vocabulary. Whether Matsuoka moaned, came, or cried, it was always "cute". That was all he said, like a one-trick pony.

Matsuoka's uncertainties about having sex as two men was swept cleanly away by the way Hirosue hungrily lusted for him. The man licked his small nipples until he thought they would melt, and even in bed he took Matsuoka's member into his mouth. Hirosue appeared to feel pleasure from it, too. When Matsuoka felt the man's groin grow hard against his thigh as he fondled him, he was so happy he was brought to tears.

The sleeping man enticed Matsuoka to draw up and kiss him gently. He was startled to see the man's eyes, which were supposed to be closed, snap open. The man's arms circled around him, and he was flipped onto his back. Hirosue crawled on top of him as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and stared at him with their faces inches away from each other. His eyes were erotic but gentle.

Hirosue ran his fingers through his hair, and carefully stroked his cheek. The man's eyes were fixed so intently on him that Matsuoka dropped his gaze in sheepishness. But he did want to be

kissed, and the minute he thought so, their lips overlapped, and he was hugged tightly. It was so comforting, he thought his heart would collapse.

"Mmh... nh..."

They could clearly feel each other in the flesh as they entwined their tongues in a kiss. Matsuoka wished he could turn into some kind of sweet confectionery from head to toe. His hips were numb, he felt lethargic; yet, he wished the man would seek him more. He wanted the man to desire him.

After reducing Matsuoka to a limp mass with his kiss, Hirosue propped himself up. He pulled Matsuoka up, who was lying beside him, and took him into his arms. His lower region ached when he was sat down, but he slid his arms around Hirosue's back anyway and held him close.

Although he didn't feel hungry, Matsuoka's stomach gave a loud growl. Since Hirosue was right up against him, he must have heard as well. It was embarrassing. Just once would have been tolerable, but his stomach continued its plaintive protest.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really," Matsuoka responded hastily.

"But your stomach is growling." Hirosue placed his palm against Matsuoka's belly, which growled plaintively again. It seemed like even his inner organs were begging to be babied by Hirosue.

"It's almost noon, isn't it? I'll go buy something."

Hirosue gave Matsuoka several smacking kisses around his ears, then got off the bed. He picked up the clothes he had thrown off yesterday and put them on. He was not naked anymore—just that fact was enough to make Matsuoka sad, and he felt like there was something wrong with him to think that way.

After Hirosue changed, he sat down on the edge of the bed and peered at Matsuoka's face.

"Is there anything you feel like eating?"

"I'll eat anything."

Hirosue cocked his head. "What do you like?"

Matsuoka was at a loss. But he felt like he had to give an answer, so he said "rice balls" off the top of his head.

"Rice balls it is. I'll be right back."

Hirosue gave him a light peck and a stroke on the head before he went out. After seeing the man off, Matsuoka pulled the sheets over his head and curled up into a ball.

"—This is unreal," he muttered to himself.

Hirosue so gentle, it was enough to make him feel faint. Matsuoka had never pampered someone or been pampered by someone to this degree before. He was blissful, but it was so blissful it was almost frightening. Once he got used to this cloying atmosphere, he would never be able to get out of it. He would never be able to return to normal.

But just because he was afraid of the future, he could not stop moving forward. He could not stop dead in his tracks.

Matsuoka lay wrapped up in his sheets like a chick waiting for its mother bird to bring food. Even though Hirosue had just left, Matsuoka kept wondering if he would come home soon.

Hirosue came back about fifteen minutes later with nothing but rice balls, and a dozen of them

at that. He said he didn't know what Matsuoka liked, so he had bought one of every kind at the store.

The sight of the man sheepishly explaining himself with his back stooped was maddeningly endearing. The two of them did not leave the apartment until they had finished all twelve rice balls. They did not talk much, nor did they watch TV. They were satisfied just rolling around in bed and playing like kittens.

Matsuoka quite seriously wished that Sunday evening would never come so Hirosue would not have to go home.

Matsuoka was contacted by his former upperclassman, Rokushima, about midway through September. When Rokushima asked to see him on Saturday or Sunday during the daytime, Matsuoka turned him down, saying he had plans that he could not change. Rokushima then proposed a compromise to meet on Friday night. Hirosue was coming down on Friday night, but Matsuoka also felt guilty for turning Rokushima down so many times. He agreed to see the man for a little bit and told Hirosue to go on and wait for him at his apartment.

At seven in the evening, Rokushima arrived twenty minutes late to the Western-style pub near the station where they were scheduled to meet.

"Sorry about that. The consultation with my client went on for longer than I expected."

Rokushima downed a glass of beer as soon as he arrived. He and Matsuoka had gone to the same university, but Matsuoka had been in the Faculty of Finance while Rokushima was two years his senior and in the Faculty of Law. Although they were in different schools, they came to know each other through soccer club. Club members didn't actually play soccer, like a soccer team; they mainly spectated at games as supporters.

Rokushima and Matsuoka started talking as fellow fans of a minor team called the Predis, and after they hit it off, they went to watch soccer games from time to time. Even now, when they occasionally got good tickets, they still invited each other out. Games were more fun to watch with someone you knew, rather than someone who wasn't interested.

"They won in the last game, eh?" Rokushima grinned.

"They did."

"That was a spectacular assist by Kaido, don't you think?"

Matsuoka gave a sheepish grin. "I know the results, but I actually didn't get to watch the game."

"Oh, really? It was a good one."

The game had been broadcast on cable TV last week. It was at a convenient time, too, at nine on a Saturday night, but since Hirosue had been over, Matsuoka had completely forgot to even record it for later.

"Have you got a girlfriend, by any chance? Is that why?"

"Well, I guess," Matsuoka affirmed modestly.

"You were single for a pretty long time after breaking up with your ex, huh?"

"Yeah."

Two years' worth of Matsuoka's one-sided feelings had finally been requited about two

months ago, but he wasn't about to say that to others.

"Hey, do the ladies like that?" Rokushima pointed the short goatee on Matsuoka's chin.

"Um, I'm not sure if they do."

"A goatee must be nice." Rokushima stroked his own clean-shaven chin.

"Why don't you try one out?" Matsuoka suggested.

"No can do," Rokushima said, shrugging. "First impressions are important, right? So if I even give off a hint of—what would you call it—casualness? It's bad for my image."

Rokushima had a stocky build and his facial features were pronounced. If he fashioned himself a goatee, he would go beyond casual into downright scary-looking territory. The man himself didn't seem to realize it.

"Especially old people," Rokushima continued. "I'm sailing a boat made of mud,<sup>2</sup> so I can't afford to take any risky gambles."

This April, Rokushima had left his position at a large law firm to open his own business. Rokushima seemed to be having a hard time running his own business, which was different from a large law firm where a steady stream of work came in without the need to market oneself, and a salary was deposited regularly into one's bank account. At his own firm, big jobs weren't guaranteed to come in, and the jobs that did come in were not all necessarily good money, either.

Matsuoka touched his own chin. At first, he had grown a goatee purely out of the desire to change his look as drastically as possible. At the time, he had still been going out on sales rounds, and all of his business contacts had poked fun at him. He thought about shaving it off once he got promoted to section chief, but by then it had become a sort of trademark. Matsuoka lost his chance to shave his goatee off, which was why he was still wearing it today.

Matsuoka wasn't too attached to his goatee, and he felt like it was high time he changed his look. He was held back, however, by Hirose's unexpected affinity for it. He would often touch Matsuoka's chin, and lick or bite it as if to get a better feel for it. —Hirose had strange tastes.

Matsuoka glanced at his watch.

"Oh, I should let you know beforehand. I actually have to be home by nine today."

"Come on, we haven't seen each other in ages and this is how you treat me? You heartless guy," Rokushima grumbled as he went on to drink his second beer. After taking a draught, he let out a great sigh with a foam moustache on his upper lip.

"My clerk is quitting at the end of the year," he said. Back when he opened his own law firm in April, Rokushima had been looking to hire a clerk. Matsuoka had heard the news just when Hirose had been laid off and was having trouble landing his next job.

Matsuoka had jumped at the chance to bring up the topic of Rokushima's firm to Hirose. But at the time, Hirose had not told Matsuoka about his layoff. By acting on his own discretion, on information from a third party, and setting up a job opportunity for Hirose without even hearing anything from the man himself, Matsuoka had delivered a harsh blow to Hirose's pride as a man.

It had been hell after that. Not only did Hirose dump him in the worst way possible and go back to the country, Matsuoka had also caused a headache for Rokushima, whom he had begged to keep the position open.

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2 To be in a precarious or unstable position (like how a mud boat would be prone to melting and sinking).



To be honest, even now Matsuoka did not want to remember what happened back then.

"She's quitting?" Matsuoka asked. "But it's only been six months. Is she getting married, or something?"

After that, Rokushima had hired a twenty-two-year-old female university graduate as a clerk.

"That's right." Rokushima hunched his shoulders. "But she's doing me a huge favour by quitting. I was wrong for being too indulgent with her just because her face and voice was cute. It was my first time managing other people, too, so I'd just let the little mistakes slide, but thanks to that she hasn't learned how to do her job at all."

He heaved a long sigh.

"I knew I couldn't let this continue, so I tried to be strict to her, but she'd start crying every time. So you get all this menial work accumulating because she hasn't learned how to do her job, which in turn makes my irritation build up. I used to turn a blind eye when she'd make personal calls during work, but it started to get on my nerves more and more. When she said she was quitting to get married, I was jumping for joy. That means I'd only have to put up with three more months of her."

After raising his arms triumphantly, Rokushima plucked a piece of avocado from his salad and tossed it into his mouth.

"She was great at the interview, you know. She had a cute smile, spoke clearly, and she seemed like she had an eye for details. But nowadays there are books out there on how to perform well at interviews. If you read one of those cover-to-cover, it'd probably be easy to give the kind of answers I'm looking for. —It goes to show that you don't know what someone is like until you start working with them. So, that's why," Rokushima continued, "I've learned my lesson. You can't tell how good someone is from their education or interview. This time, I want someone whom I already know can do the work. Not women, because they're troublesome. A man. Someone who's upright, down-to-earth, and has clerical experience."

Hirosue face rose in the back of Matsuoka's mind.

"Hey, remember in March you said you knew someone good?" Rokushima said.

Matsuoka swallowed hard.

"I remember you mentioning he was upright to the point of being uptight. Former co-worker, right?"

"Well, ah..."

Rokushima nodded slightly. "Back then, you told me so many times he was a good candidate. I feel like I could trust this guy if this is coming from you. Do you think he'd want to work for me after the girl quits in December?"

Rokushima bit into a chicken wing as he spoke.

"But, well, seeing what happened with the girl and everything, it'd be best if I could have drinks with this guy once in lieu of an interview. Talk openly with him before I decide."

Matsuoka lowered his face and thought.

"Do you need an answer right away?" he asked.

"Mm, not right away. The girl's going to be around until the end of December. But if he can, it'd be nice to have him come in once a week starting in the end of November for a couple of times. That way, the transfer would go over more smoothly."

It was past nine-thirty when Matsuoka got on his train to go home. Rokushima told him he wanted an answer about the clerical position by the end of November.

Matsuoka had already e-mailed Hirosue once at the *izakaya* to tell him that he was coming home late. On the train home, he also sent an e-mail, saying, 'I'm on my way home now. Sorry.' He got a reply immediately.

*'No problem. Be careful on your way back.'*

There was nothing to be careful about, since he was a man, but Matsuoka couldn't hide the happy feeling in the corner of his heart as he snapped his cell phone shut.

Hirosue always came every weekend. He came without fail, unless Matsuoka was on a business trip or had plans he could not change. Since Hirosue was living at his parents' house, he said that the money he got from helping out only amounted to a part-time worker's wage. Coming out every week was surely a heavy financial burden. If he kept going beyond his means, it would not last. Matsuoka had once suggested that he could visit Hirosue in the country instead, but Hirosue did not relent.

Matsuoka had also proposed paying for Hirosue's bullet train fare. Hirosue had suddenly gone silent, his face turning rigid. Matsuoka had broken into a cold sweat, thinking he had hurt Hirosue's pride like he did when he brought up the job offer. He almost wished Hirosue would get angry — that way, at least he could apologize.

What if Hirosue simply left the room without saying anything? What if he refused to listen to Matsuoka's explanation or apology, and it was going to be like the time he went back to the country all over again? Matsuoka's stomach had churned in the face of the silent man before him.

"Thank you for worrying about me," Hirosue had said quietly a long while later. "But this is something I do because I want to. You don't have to worry about it, Matsuoka."

Hirosue did not get angry, nor did he leave. But his eyes were sad as he stroked Matsuoka's cheek. Now Matsuoka had no doubts that this topic was taboo. Since then, he had not spoken a single word more about it.

But just because he had stopped talking about it, it didn't mean that Matsuoka wasn't still worried about Hirosue's finances. So, after much thought and debate, Matsuoka decided to start cooking at home. They always went out to eat when Hirosue came down, but if they kept it up every week, it would add up to quite a lot of money. They split the bill cleanly in half every time, and although Hirosue treated him occasionally, he never let Matsuoka treat him. If he started cooking at home, Matsuoka figured he would at least be able to save Hirosue some food money.

In terms of cooking, Matsuoka only knew how to make fried noodles, grilled egg, and a few other dishes. He was good at making curry, but he wouldn't be able to serve just that to Hirosue. Matsuoka bought a recipe book which was emblazoned with the copy "Super Easy!" on the cover, and slowly began to study cooking.

At first his results were not too tasty, but once he got the hang of it, he began to be able to cook decently well. He didn't want Hirosue to pick up any hint about why he had suddenly changed to home-cooking, so Matsuoka lied and told him he had to eat healthy because his company's medical checkup was coming up.

Although Matsuoka had started cooking more or less out of necessity than choice, he soon

found that it wasn't all burdensome. At first, Hirosue had only peered at what Matsuoka was doing from behind, but now he had gradually started to help out.

For Matsuoka, it was faster just to do things by himself. To be honest, Hirosue was more of a hindrance than a help, but it was cute to watch the man peel potatoes with clumsy hands and a look of intense concentration.

"Is this okay?" he would say hesitantly as he cautiously presented his sliced carrots which were a little too thick to be called slices.

When Matsuoka said "Not quite," he would hang his head in dejection. The sight was so endearing, it made Matsuoka laugh.

Although cooking helped a little, such a patchwork solution for saving money did nothing to solve the root of the problem. Matsuoka found out that his company had a sales office near Hirosue's house, about forty minutes away by car, and looked into it. However, there were few employees there, and there were no openings. When he made a casual mention of it to an acquaintance in Human Resources, the man told Matsuoka that although the place was a branch office, it was mostly made up of contract workers; there were only two permanent employees.

"You think they'd take my request for a transfer?" Matsuoka had asked him.

"Not a chance," his acquaintance had said with a laugh.

Matsuoka was moving steadily up the ranks at his company. Being transferred from headquarters to a branch company away from the city would be a stall or regression in his career, and definitely not a step up. Matsuoka liked his job and wanted to move upwards, but even more than that, he wanted to be with Hirosue.

To be completely honest, he wished Hirosue would come out of the country. He had said his brother and wife had succeeded the family business, and if it weren't for his layoff, Hirosue would have stayed in the city. Since the lack of a job had sent him back to the country, Matsuoka felt like Hirosue would come back out again if he had a place to work at.

He was still deep in thought when his train arrived at the station near his condo. He went through the ticket gates and walked briskly. He didn't want to keep Hirosue waiting when the man had already come such a long way to see him.

"Matsuoka."

A voice called him from behind while he was waiting at a red light in front of the station. Matsuoka turned around and was startled to see Hirosue there.

"Let's walk home together," Hirosue said with a shy grin. He was wearing jeans and a collared shirt, Hirosue's trademark combination. "I was at the bookstore, anyway, and I figured you'd get here any minute now, so I was waiting. You went zooming past, so I almost couldn't catch you."

A small plastic bag hung from Hirosue's hand. Matsuoka wondered if he was being overly optimistic for thinking that the book was just an excuse for the man to come pick him up.

"Oh, um... sorry for being late," Matsuoka apologized. "I was talking with a former upperclassman from university, and we got carried away."

The light turned green, and they crossed the street together.

"Don't worry about me. You should have taken your time."

Matsuoka was careful with his tone. But Hirosue's words did not seem to carry any deeper

meaning, and Matsuoka did not feel the need to delve deeper for one. Nonetheless, if Hirosue's book was an excuse to pick him up, he felt like he had made the man weary of waiting, which made him feel guilty.

A droplet hit the tip of Matsuoka's nose. Hirosue also lifted his face.

"...It's raining."

They were less than ten minutes away from the condo. If only the sky had held out a little longer. What bad timing it was.

"Matsuoka, let's run."

The man suddenly grabbed his right hand and broke into a run. His hand was yanked along, and Matsuoka also hastily stumbled into a run after him. The hand that held his was hot. Since they were already close to the condo, it did not take them long to arrive. Although they had been running for less than five minutes, Matsuoka's shoulders still rose and fell with the strain once they burst into the entrance lobby.

"I was surprised when you suddenly started running."

The elevator quietly ascended.

"I thought we'd get wet."

The running seemed to have quickened the flow of alcohol in his system. Although he had started to sober up, Matsuoka began to feel lightheaded again. He staggered from the slight dizziness, and quickly grabbed onto Hirosue's arm.

"Are you alright?"

"Um. Yeah. I think the alcohol's coming around again."

As Hirosue supported his back, Matsuoka looked up. When their eyes met, the man pulled him closer until their bodies were nestled up against each other. Even though they were alone now, other people could come on at any minute. The sight of two men hugging like this was abnormal, no matter how you looked at it.

"Hirosue—" Before he could say "get away from me" his lips were sealed with a kiss. It was for a split moment — so short he didn't even have time to push the man away — and the man gave him such a happy, mischievous grin that it was hard to reprimand him.

The elevator stopped. Even after they exited into the hallway, they were still holding hands. Matsuoka felt helplessly happy but embarrassed at the same time, and he kept his head down as they walked, even though no one was watching.

Hirosue was a quiet man, but sometimes he was bold in his actions. Matsuoka could never predict Hirosue's timing, and was always taken by surprise.

Hirosue unlocked the door with the spare key that Matsuoka had given him. Their fingers were still linked after they went inside. He didn't want the man to let go, nor did he have any intentions of letting go himself.

"Matsuoka, you've eaten, right?"

"Yeah. —What about you, Hirosue?"

"I had something at the *izakaya* nearby."

The hand clasping his tightened its grip. The man gazed at him in the dim light of the entrance. Matsuoka sensed he would be invited to bed. The man's palm was unusually hot.

“Do you want to take a shower together?”

It was Hirosue’s way of coming onto him. Judging by the mood, it looked like they would be heading straight for the bathroom. Matsuoka put his work bag down on the floor.

“Okay,” he said meekly.

They had talked about going somewhere on Saturday, like the movies. But it continued to rain hard, and going outside seemed bothersome.

As they discussed what to do, Matsuoka remembered that he had bought a DVD that he hadn’t watched yet. Even though it was still daytime, they both cracked open beers and lazed around on the sofa. Hirosue eventually fell asleep on Matsuoka’s lap.

Hirosue did not wake up even after the movie was over. Matsuoka was filled with happiness to feel the lingering spot of warmth in his lap. *If Hirosue had to be a cat or dog, he would definitely be a dog,* Matsuoka thought. He wished Hirosue really was. If Hirosue were a dog, Matsuoka would be able to keep him in his apartment. They would be able to sleep together every night.

When they had just started dating, Matsuoka was happy but anxious — anxious that the man would suddenly get sick of him and abandon him. But now, after close to two months, thanks to Hirosue’s actions, he began to feel like it was alright.

Hirosue was gentle, and showed Matsuoka that he cared in his own way. He came down every week and slept over. He phoned and e-mailed every day, he left no room for doubt. Matsuoka knew Hirosue loved him with all this being, and was also making efforts to keep their relationship going. He wished that was enough to satisfy him, but he found himself wanting more and more.

The time they spent together was enjoyable. But whether they made love like animals or frolicked playfully, once Sunday evening rolled around, Hirosue left to go home. There was no moment that Matsuoka hated more than the moment of coming home after seeing Hirosue off at the station. Even the sight of his half-finished cup of coffee on the table made the void in his heart ache.

He wanted Hirosue to work at his upperclassman’s firm, and live here with him. They could say they were doing a flat-share: that would serve as a decent excuse for the rest of society. But he could not say it. The dilemma formed an unsettling knot in his chest.

For all his mildness and gentleness, Hirosue had the pride to match. If Matsuoka did him unasked favours, it would probably make his mood worse, just like the time Hirosue had left him to go back to the country.

Hirosue was a man to whom Matsuoka had finally been able to get through after a gruelling experience. He didn’t want to let things get awkward between them or let the man go because of such a small thing.

Although Matsuoka knew he couldn’t bring the topic up to Hirosue, he also could not refuse the job proposal outright. It was an attractive offer, and since Hirosue was serious about his work, he would probably do well with Rokushima.

If they had been a man and a woman, things would have been more simple. The fact that they were both men seemed to create this barely-detectable barrier between them.

The man himself, the source of all of his mental troubles, was fast asleep in his lap. Matsuoka

softly touched his ear. Hirosue's shoulder twitched.

"You're fake sleeping," Matsuoka murmured. Hirosue guiltily opened his eyes.

"I was really asleep for part of the time." The way he said it like an excuse made Matsuoka laugh.

"I never said fake sleeping was bad."

Hirosue got up with a grunt, then drew Matsuoka close and sat him on his lap.

"You like this position, don't you?" Matsuoka said casually. Hirosue blinked in surprise.

"Do I?"

*You made me mount you like this yesterday*, he thought of retorting, but didn't.

"Yeah. You do."

"Well, this way I can see your face properly."

He was drawn closer. Their lips naturally met. Matsuoka felt like doing it, but Hirosue only kissed him and playfully nipped or licked his chin, and didn't seem to be in the mood.

"—Why don't you move back out here?"

"Hm?"

Matsuoka panicked at the words that had slipped unwittingly out of his mouth.

"Uh—nothing. Don't worry about it." He hastily tried to wave away his words. Hirosue watched him steadily. His gaze was not sharp. Although his eyes were gentle, Matsuoka felt too awkward to look at him back.

"Do you want me to move back here?"

*Of course I do*, he mentally shot back, but didn't say it out loud. But it was true that he wanted Hirosue to move back. *Should I say so clearly? But—* Matsuoka's public manners and honest feelings began to fight tooth and nail with each other in his head.

"Matsuoka?"

"—We can see each other every week, anyway. That's enough for me." His public manners slipped from his tongue with a face as cool as a cucumber. He was afraid Hirosue would read his mind if he looked at his face, so Matsuoka clung to Hirosue's neck instead.

The following week after that exchange, Hirosue did not come out for the weekend. Matsuoka had assumed without question that Hirosue was coming, but had a foreboding feeling when Hirosue told him during their Thursday night phone call that he had an errand to run and could not come this week.

"Things have been busy at home, and we don't have enough workers on hand."

He had sounded genuinely sorry. Matsuoka had no intentions of doubting him, but... it made him want to. This was right after he had asked the man to move back out here last week. *'But I come out every week. Isn't that enough for you?'* he could imagine the man thinking. He felt like Hirosue found him bothersome.

"That's too bad, then," he relented easily without being too insistent, but inwardly Matsuoka was almost beside himself with agitation. Their conversation usually went on easily for one or two hours, but today, Hirosue wrapped up their conversation after thirty minutes, claiming he had something to take care of.

*It can't be helped. He has his own business.* Matsuoka trusted Hirosue's words, but at the same

time, his mind was overtaken with dark memories. Once before, Matsuoka had experienced Hirosue blatantly trying to put distance between them. His e-mails had gone unanswered for regular intervals, which gradually got longer as the man gradually widened his distance.

His weekly visits would dwindle to once every two weeks, then three weeks; his phone calls would get shorter, and his e-mails would grow intermittent until they eventually died out—it made Matsuoka all the more afraid because he had experienced it before.

He almost wanted to call Hirosue back and ask him if he loved him. But he couldn't. If he hadn't wanted to come down because he was angry about the incident from the other day, he would probably find it even more annoying if Matsuoka called him again.

Hirosue was very kind when they were alone together. Matsuoka could tell the man was very attached to him. But as soon as they were apart, Matsuoka could no longer have confidence in anything anymore.

It was Friday, the day Hirosue usually came. Matsuoka felt like he would only think of needless things if he stayed alone, so he invited Shinozaki out for drinks. Then, a female subordinate of his also chimed in and said she wanted to go. Matsuoka agreed, since he wasn't particularly fixated on the number of people. Soon, other people joined in, with a "me, too" "me, three"—in the end, their party grew to eight people.

They gave a toast with beer in a *izakaya* which had a good ambiance and tasty food for a reasonable price. Matsuoka had been prone to holing up in his apartment with Hirosue these days, and had not gone out for drinks in a while. It had been a while since he last experienced this kind of noisy atmosphere.

"It's rare of you to be free on Friday, Chief." Shinozaki already appeared to be tipsy from the beer, for his mouth was relaxed in a slack grin.

"Really?"

"He's right," Uemura jumped in from across. "These days you always go home early at the end of the week. Does your girlfriend always visit you on weekends?"

"What?" A male worker exclaimed. "Chief, you have a girlfriend?"

"You didn't know?" Uemura looked unperturbed. Apparently everyone else knew except for him, because no one appeared surprised.

"Chief is in a long-distance relationship. And he's totally into his girlfriend," Shinozaki spoke in an all-knowing tone. But Matsuoka had only told him that he was dating someone and that "she" was kind. Had he ever told him that it was long-distance?

"You tried to file a transfer request to a branch out of the city for your girlfriend, right?"

The group buzzed. *What? No way. You must be lying.*

"How do *you* know?" Matsuoka exclaimed. Shinozaki grinned slyly.

"Kato from HR is my smoking buddy."

"Chief, are you going to leave headquarters?" said a female worker tearfully. Matsuoka hastily waved his right hand to negate her utterance.

"No, no, that won't happen. Even if I sent in a request, it probably wouldn't be accepted. And I

have my work to do here.”

“You don’t have to go chasing after your girlfriend. Why don’t you bring her here and get married?”

As soon as the words were out of Shinozaki’s mouth, all of the female workers turned to glare daggers at him. Shinozaki didn’t seem to notice.

“Show us what she looks like,” he said excitedly. “You have pictures of her on your phone, don’t you?” He inched up to Matsuoka.

“No, I don’t.” Actually, he had secretly taken pictures of Hirose sleeping because he found the man’s defenceless face cute. But he hadn’t told Hirose, and he had no intentions of showing anyone else.

“Oh, come on. I *know* you have pictures.”

Shinozaki was being a persistent drunk today.

“I really don’t. She’s really shy about those things.”

“—She’s pretty, isn’t she?”

“Huh?”

“Your girlfriend must be pretty, Chief. I’m sure of it.” Shinozaki’s tone was decisive. When Matsuoka insisted she was average, he stubbornly shook his head. “Nope. She’s probably pretty. And—let me guess—she’s skinny, delicate, good at cooking and stuff, and cleans the house for you, right?”

Matsuoka smiled wryly and took a swig of the beer in his hand.

“I do the cooking, actually.”

“Chief, you cook?” Uemura asked in surprise.

“Just simple stuff.”

“Why do you need to cook? You should just get your girlfriend to cook for you,” Shinozaki said, sticking his lip out.

“Cooking isn’t really her forte, and when I cook it tastes better. She’s working, too, but still comes to my house every week. I don’t want to make her cook when she already takes so much time to come out here. I thought the least I could do was handle the cooking part.”

His real reason was to save money, but there was no need to give that information.

“Chief, you’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?” Shinozaki growled in a low voice. His eyes were fixed sullenly on him.

“Doing what on purpose?”

“You’re good-looking, you’re good at your job, *and* you can cook! You’re too perfect!”

“I told you, I only cook because she’s not good at it.”

Shinozaki didn’t seem to be convinced, and kept tilting his head in perplexity.

Their drinking party ended just before ten o’clock. The food was good, and Matsuoka enjoyed the conversation. He felt like he’d start thinking of all sorts of things once he got home, but it was a relief to even forget it for a moment.

Although he had agreed to split the bill amongst everyone, Matsuoka instead collected two



thousand yen<sup>3</sup> from each person and paid for the rest.<sup>4</sup> After they exited the restaurant, Uemura came up to him and lowered her head in apology.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I told Shinozaki I wanted to come along, and all these other people ended up coming along, too."

"Don't worry about it. I enjoyed myself."

"I'm sorry," Uemura apologized again, then gazed intently at him. "I'm so envious," she murmured. "I get the feeling that your girlfriend is cherished very much."

"Well, I'm the one that fell for her, so I'm always desperate not to get dumped."

Uemura gave a brief smile. She looked like she was about to cry.

"What're you two talking about?" Their conversation lapsed as Shinozaki came butting in. The group broke up as each went their separate ways in front of the restaurant. Matsuoka and Shinozaki, who were taking the same train line, walked to the station together.

Matsuoka's body was warm at first from the alcohol, but he began to feel chilly as they walked. He put on the jacket he had been hanging on his arm. He could see Shinozaki beside him taking out a cigarette and lighting it. His nose twitched at the familiar smell.

"Say, Chief, you quit, right? I don't know how you did it," Shinozaki murmured as he let out a puff of white smoke.

"I still crave it sometimes."

"Oh, would you like one?"

Matsuoka stopped Shinozaki as he began to rifle in his pocket.

"I can never quit for long," Shinozaki said. "What's the trick to it?"

"Well, I don't know if there really is a trick to it. I guess for me, it was because my lover doesn't smoke."

"Whoa," Shinozaki hunched his shoulders as he let out an exclamation of astonishment. "Did your girlfriend tell you to quit?"

"She didn't say so, but since she doesn't smoke herself, I figured she didn't really like it, either."

Shinozaki smiled with the cigarette still in his mouth.

"But don't you get tired having to go out of your way for your girlfriend like that? Quitting smoking because she doesn't smoke, or cooking for her because she's bad at it?"

"Not really." Matsuoka had never found it tiring. He was more afraid of things turning for the worse because he wasn't careful enough.

They arrived at the station just as their train came gliding in, and they both made a run for it. Shinozaki got off after two stops, but Matsuoka had to stay on for six stops more.

He had jumped on the closest train car after the ticket gates since the train had been about to leave, but the car near the front was better for him when he got off at his condo. Matsuoka walked slowly through the rocking train.

It was relatively uncrowded. Matsuoka was gazing around for an empty seat when he spotted a familiar figure standing near the door with his back turned. He was wearing jeans and a plaid shirt.

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3 About 20 dollars.

4 A customary gesture of kindness where the "senpai" or senior, presumably as the more financially-able person of the party, will pay for his younger subordinates/underclassmen.

Matsuoka's heart fluttered. *Could it be*, he wondered as he stared, but it was hard to see his face since the man had his back turned to him.

The train stopped, and the man turned around as if to avoid the people trying to get off the train. It was Hirosue. There was no doubt about it. He had come down here even while saying he was busy with work at home.

The man had lied to him. Matsuoka's mind went blank with the shock. Matsuoka inched backwards until he was standing near the junction between the cars, and faced the wall.

He knew the man told lies, and he knew Hirosue always tried to justify himself when things got inconvenient for him. Matsuoka had let his guard down completely because Hirosue hadn't showed any signs of it after they started dating.

Despite the immovable fact that Hirosue had lied to him, Matsuoka still looked for a hopeful way out. Perhaps Hirosue was really busy, but had suddenly gotten some time off and come down to see him. Matsuoka opened his cell phone. He had gotten some casual e-mails from Hirosue in the morning, but not so much as a phone call after that.

Matsuoka gripped his cell phone. Perhaps Hirosue wasn't contacting him because he had come in secret planning to surprise him. If so, Hirosue was a huge goof to be found out by him. Matsuoka could even go up to him to say hello, to prove it.

But he was too afraid. It was possible that Hirosue had come out to see him, but it was also possible that he hadn't.

His suspicions came true when Hirosue got off at the station one stop before the one close to Matsuoka's condo. Matsuoka could only stand in stunned silence at Hirosue's retreating back as the train lurched back into motion.

After getting off the train and passing through the ticket gates, Matsuoka took out his cell phone. After a little hesitation, he pressed the button. The other end picked up after five rings.

"Hi, Matsuoka. What's up?" Hirosue's voice was no different from the usual.

"Um... nothing much. Do you have time to talk right now? What about work?"

"It's over. What about you, Matsuoka?"

"I was drinking with some co-workers and I'm on the way home now. Are you at home, Hirosue?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking of going to bed soon."

Another lie. There was no way Hirosue could be at home when he had gotten off at the station before him. Matsuoka looked at his feet. His despair deepened. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a car in the background from Hirosue's end of the line.

"Are you outside right now? I heard a car pass by."

There was a moment of silence on the other end.

"Oh, um. Yeah. I'm at a vending machine nearby, buying some beer."

"You're busy with work tomorrow, too, aren't you? Make sure you don't drink too much."

Matsuoka made a subtle gesture of kindness before quickly hanging up. He instantly regretted it. *I should have grilled him and said I saw him on the train. I should have told him not to lie.* He could have even... gotten angry, and even gotten into a fight. Couldn't he?

As soon as he got home, Matsuoka flung his work bag aside and slumped heavily on his sofa.

It wasn't like the man had cheated on him; he was having an exaggerated reaction over a little lie. Hirosue probably had his own things that he wanted to do without being snooped on. But if that was the case, he wished Hirosue would have told him truthfully that he would come out, but would not be able to see him because he had plans. That would have convinced him to back off.

Lies and excuses. Everything tangled inside his head and coloured it black. *I should just go to bed*, he thought as he made his way to the bathroom sink. The second toothbrush jumped into his vision. He had put it there for Hirosue, who came every weekend. Just the sight of it made his heart ache, and Matsuoka turned on his heel and headed straight for the bedroom. He collapsed into bed, which seemed to carry Hirosue's scent, too, and made tears fall from his eyes.

Unable to stand it anymore, Matsuoka sprang up, returned to the living room, and clawed at his phone. Without even giving himself a chance for second thoughts, he dialled Hirosue's number.

"Hello?"

This time, the man answered after two rings. He didn't have anything prepared in his head, since he had called on a whim—he had nothing other than interrogating questions.

"Matsuoka?"

He was even annoyed at himself. It was enough to make him feel sick.

"It's Matsuoka, isn't it? What's wrong?" Hirosue's voice was hesitant but gentle. That was why Matsuoka could not say anything.

"Oh, sorry. I thought you were someone from work," he said brightly, suppressing the trembling in his voice. He could hear Hirosue laugh out loud on the other end.

"I didn't think you were the clumsy type."

"Sorry."

"No problem. Thanks to that, I got to hear your voice twice today. Good night."

Matsuoka also bid good night and hung up the phone. On one hand, Hirosue lied like it was nothing; on the other, he said such touching things it made him tremble with joy. Matsuoka didn't know what to believe anymore. After lying on his stomach for some time, he dragged himself up and headed to the fridge. He took out a beer. He didn't think he would be able to sleep tonight.

Matsuoka spent Saturday and Sunday either sleeping or drinking. He got no phone calls from Hirosue, only four e-mails. He wanted to hear the man's voice, but he couldn't bear hearing or discovering any more lies, so he did not make any calls himself.

On Monday morning, Matsuoka had a dull ache in the base of his head. Perhaps the alcohol from the night before hadn't quite left his system. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror and realized how pitiful he looked with his overgrown stubble, which had been left untouched since Saturday and Sunday. Matsuoka made a sweeping stroke with his razor, taking special care with the blade as he groomed the borders of his small goatee.

He was spaced out, perhaps, for his fingers slipped. By the time he realized it, it was too late. He had already shaved half of his goatee off. No amount of adjusting could patch this up now. Matsuoka had no choice but to entirely shave off the goatee he had maintained so regularly until now.

On the train to work, and even after he arrived at the office, Matsuoka's head was prone to

drooping. He hadn't wanted to shave off his goatee, especially because Hirosue seemed to like it. He often nipped at it or licked it when they were fooling around. When Matsuoka resisted because it tickled, Hirosue would touch it even more. It annoyed him but made him happy at the same time.

A part of him that Hirosue liked had disappeared. It felt like a foreshadowing of their future, making Matsuoka's feelings plummet. He hastily waved away his negative thoughts.

When bad things came in succession, Matsuoka's irritation often spilled into his work. He desperately repressed the impulse to take it out on his subordinates and bought cigarettes and a lighter during his break. As he was lighting up in the smoking area, Shinozaki came in and let out a happy exclamation.

"Oh! Chief. So rare to see you here."

His happy tone grated on Matsuoka's nerves.

"Smoking is great, isn't it? There's no other moment quite like it," Shinozaki said.

Although he was irritated, ignoring Shinozaki was not an option. Matsuoka smiled wryly in response and continued to smoke. He was so easy to read when he was stressed out. He always sought refuge in alcohol and smoking.

"Say, why did you shave off your goatee? You had it for a while, didn't you?"

Several people had asked him the same question when he came into the office today. Matsuoka lightly ran his fingers along his chin, which still felt strange.

"No reason. I got tired of it."

Matsuoka smoked two cigarettes to their fullest before returning to the office. Although he had already checked his phone at the smoking area, he peered at the screen again right after he sat down in his chair. There was no e-mail from Hirosue. He hadn't received the usual e-mail this morning, either.

He hated the e-mails that never came, and he also hated himself for waiting endlessly for them to come. He turned his phone off, only to realize it would probably be bad for his work, and turned it back on.

*He probably forgot to send an e-mail in the morning. He probably didn't follow up because by the time he noticed it was already the start of the work day, and he didn't want to e-mail during work hours. He's always been the kind of guy not to e-mail during work.*

Despite the desperate excuses he made for himself, Matsuoka still did not receive an e-mail from Hirosue even after he finished work and boarded the train bound for home.

*I wonder if we're just going to end like this,* Matsuoka wondered as he clutched his phone. Last time, Hirosue had distanced himself at a more gradual pace. Compared to that time, things were moving much more rapidly, and Hirosue's actions were much more obvious.

Things has been going too well until now. He should have seen the red flags: it was unnatural for the man to suddenly turn gentle after being unaccepting of him for so long. Even when Hirosue told him he loved him, Matsuoka wasn't able to believe him. Although he wanted to, he was too afraid.

But in the end, Matsuoka hadn't been able to refuse the man completely because he, too, still loved him back. Matsuoka asked himself what would have been better: to have dated properly before breaking up, or to have let things end without dating at all. It was no use comparing the two. They

were equally horrible.

On the way to his apartment from the station, Matsuoka stopped by a convenience store and bought two six-packs of beer. He was clearly preparing to drink his miseries away. He didn't want to let this painful drifting-apart draw out any longer, so he would end things quickly. He'd be able to find the likes of Hirosue anywhere, anyway.

—But there was no way he could cut loose and move on so quickly. If he could, he wouldn't be dating Hirosue in the first place. After all, even though he had foreseen failure, he had still clung to an uncertain possibility and continued to harbour one-sided feelings.

Unable to pick either path, he had no choice but to hold onto his turmoil and use alcohol as an escape.

Matsuoka had his head slightly bowed as he opened the door to his apartment, and was surprised to see that the hallway was lit. In the doorway was a familiar pair of shoes which were one size bigger than his. Matsuoka tossed the shopping bag aside. *Don't tell me—could it be—*he thought frantically as he ran down the hallway and burst into the living room.

"Welcome home." The man sitting on the sofa turned around and smiled.

"Wh—why—"

Hirosue wasn't supposed to be able to come on weekdays because he was at work. And today wasn't even Friday.

"I had some free time." Hirosue approached Matsuoka, who was frozen in astonishment. He stroked Matsuoka's clean-shaven chin.

"It's gone."

"Um... sorry. I was spaced out in the morning, and... I ended up messing up with the razor." Matsuoka immediately regretted having shaved the goatee off because of his own clumsiness, when Hirosue had such a liking to it.

"You don't have to apologize." Hirosue humorously nudged his chin, then pulled it up. Matsuoka was drawn close, and their lips met. Matsuoka trembled as he held onto Hirosue's arms.

"—It's been a while. You taste like cigarettes."

Today, Matsuoka had been smoking during every free minute he had. He seemed to pick the worst timing possible for everything. Hirosue lifted his face and looked at the clock.

"Do you have a minute right now? There's a place I want to take you to."

"Where?"

Hirosue only smiled and did not give him an answer. Since Hirosue said it was nearby, Matsuoka followed after him without changing out of his suit. Hirosue ambled through the residential area.

The street lamps were spaced widely apart, and there was an especially dark spot between two of them. Matsuoka tripped over a small step and fell forward.

"Whoa!"

Before he could fall down, he was caught by the right arm. His body tipped halfway, but he was spared from slamming into the concrete sidewalk. Once Matsuoka regained his footing, the fingers holding his right arm drew away.

"Th-Thanks."

"Are you actually a bit of a klutz, Matsuoka?" Hirosue said, crinkling his eyes in a smile. But as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he also tripped and jerked a step forward. Before Matsuoka could make a remark, Hirosue made a hurried excuse.

"I already had a drink before you came home, so."

As Matsuoka's shoulders shook in laughter, Hirosue awkwardly looked at his feet. Their commonplace conversation made Matsuoka feel stupid for brooding and sulking since Friday night.

Hirosue's spirits appeared to be renewed, and he broke into a walk again. When Matsuoka drew up beside him, the man glanced sideways at him.

"It feels strange to see you without a goatee."

"You have a thing for goatees, don't you, Hirosue?"

Hirosue stopped in his tracks and thought. "Do I?"

"I've heard of scent fetishes and foot fetishes, but I certainly don't see goatee fetishes that often."

"I'm not *that* obsessed over it," Hirosue said hastily. "It just catches my attention, that's all." Matsuoka found his denial hilarious. They chit-chatted about other things for about ten more minutes before Hirosue stepped into a three-storey building.

"Where's this?"

There was no answer as they climbed wordlessly up the stairs. When they arrived in front of a suite on the far right end of the third floor, Hirosue used a key to open the door. Matsuoka was ushered inside. There was a kitchen on the right side of the hallway, which led into a far room. At the end of the hallway was a room about ten square metres in area. It felt spacious, since it was furnished with nothing but a futon. As Matsuoka stood rooted to the spot on the threshold of the room, Hirosue took his right hand and placed a key in it.

"You can have this, Matsuoka. I moved in yesterday. Feel free to visit whenever you want to."

Matsuoka had already had a feeling when they were climbing up the stairs. But he had deliberately took his mind off of it because he thought he'd only be disappointed by his overblown expectations. But now, that "what if" had turned into reality.

"Matsuoka?"

When the man peered into his face, Matsuoka finally realized he had been standing dazed with his mouth gaping open.

"—I'm so surprised, I lost my voice for a moment."

Hirosue grinned happily. "That's a good sign. I wanted to surprise you." He then went out into the hallway and took out some beers from the small refrigerator.

"A drink to celebrate," he said, as he passed one to Matsuoka. Matsuoka took a swig. He was invited to take a seat, and sank down on the *tatami* mat.

"I used a pickup truck to move all my stuff here. My brother helped me. Thanks to that, it didn't cost me a lot to move." Hirosue spoke of it lightly, but moving was not such an easy thing to do.

"Is it because of that time I told you to move back here? Is that why..."

Hirosue did not deny it.

"I guess that's a part of it," he admitted. "I've been making preparations for a while. I knew it would be cheaper to rent a place here than coming down by bullet train. But I had my job back at

home, and they had to put up job postings for a part-time worker to take over after I left, and... there was a lot of things to do. I also thought it would be more reassuring for my parents if I moved back to Tokyo after I found a job. But..."

Hirosue's fingers stroked Matsuoka's cheek.

"But when you asked me to move back, I couldn't sit still anymore."

Hirosue's hand overlapped his own on the *tatami* mat. His fingertips were startlingly hot. His eyes were also heated as his gaze tangled with Matsuoka's.

Matsuoka made the first move and drew up to kiss Hirosue. The man's feverish fingertips slid across with back with a clear intent. Tomorrow was Tuesday, but he didn't care. Matsuoka wanted this man right this moment.

Hirosue had mentioned that he had been drinking at Matsuoka's apartment and had also had something to drink after coming here. Perhaps the alcohol had taken its toll, for he fell fast asleep soon after devouring Matsuoka.

There were no curtains on the windows yet. The street lamps outside filtered in dimly through the glass, and Matsuoka could get a clear view of the man's face as he slept soundly.

He was embarrassed at himself for all the brooding he had done, thinking he was going to be dumped or that they would drift apart. While he was busy mulling over their breakup in his head, Hirosue had been planning his move so they could be closer to each other. Six months ago, the man had left without a single attachment to him, and now, he had come back—he was almost sure of it—solely out of an attachment to him. This was despite the fact that he had said he was quite content with life back in the country.

Matsuoka felt like the man loved him a lot more than he gave him credit for. The two months together so far had proved the fact well enough, but here he was having suspicions over every little thing. Matsuoka was forced to admit how weak his heart was.

He buried his nose in Hirosue's shoulder and thought to himself. He was happy. Very happy. Hirosue had moved out here for him. That in itself was already amazing. He had been greedy for wishing they could live together, he thought as he clenched his jaw.

When Hirosue thought about moving, had he not considered Matsuoka's apartment as an option? If he was going to rent a place this close, hadn't he ever considered living with Matsuoka, even on the condition of paying half of the rent?

Matsuoka had a feeling that Hirosue had thought about it. But in the end, the man had rented his own apartment because he had wanted to do things that way.

Back in the springtime, their relationship had spiralled into a mess because Matsuoka had gone and arranged work for him without being asked. Even though Matsuoka's help would have made things go smoothly, it was not what Hirosue had wanted. Now Matsuoka could agree that even if hadn't lent a helping hand, and even if the job wasn't as good as the one he was offering, Hirosue would have managed things on his own somehow.

Matsuoka figured he would also have mixed feelings if made to stand in Hirosue's shoes. No matter how much you loved someone, there were still boundaries that you could and could not cross.

That was what it boiled down to. He didn't have to go around minding things for Hirosue: the man could manage on his own, and that was what he wanted to do.

Matsuoka concluded that he could only wait. Maybe one day, Hirosue would want to be together more, and would say he wanted to live with him.

The tips of his shoulders were getting cold. Matsuoka pulled the sheets over himself and nestled up against the heat beside him.

Hirosue had said he was going to start looking for a job. The offer for his upperclassman's law firm crossed his mind. He wanted to tell Hirosue, to bring the offer up to him, but he could not. Not until Hirosue himself, even jokingly, wondered aloud whether there were any good jobs around.

Some distance was necessary in order to keep Matsuoka from trampling Hirosue's personal territory, and it was necessary for them to remain equal.

Even though Hirosue had moved close by, Matsuoka knew that privacy was still a necessity. Perhaps Hirosue hadn't mentioned moving into his apartment for the same kind of reason. *Don't get involved more than you need to.* Matsuoka took those words to heart and was careful to keep a distance.

But as one who had always wished they could live together, to be quite honest he wanted to see the man every night if he could. And he was less than a ten-minute walk away. It was less than two minutes if Matsuoka got off one stop before his own.

Matsuoka restrained himself at first and only visited once every three days. But Hirosue greeted him so happily at the door each time that it soon became once every two days, and before long, Hirosue's place was his second home.

Hirosue was doing day labour while he looked for a permanent job.

"It's not easy, with my age and all," he would say.

Although he barely talked about employment to Matsuoka, once in a while he would let a sentence or two slip. Each time, Matsuoka desperately restrained himself from blurting, "Actually, my upperclassman has a firm."

"But I already knew it was going to be challenging to find re-employment, so."

Hirosue was optimistic, and he didn't seem to be getting irritated or impatient.

Nevertheless, he was still thoroughly put out every time he got a notice of rejection, and on days like those, he was especially reluctant to let Matsuoka go home. Even if they didn't do it, he would still come clinging to him. Although Hirosue didn't put his discouragement into words, Matsuoka was still happy that the man relied on him—that he turned to him for consolation.

On the last weekend of November, Matsuoka was out shopping at a nearby supermarket when he got a phone call from Rokushima.

"So, what's going on with that friend of yours?" he asked.

"Uh," Matsuoka mumbled.

"The thing is," Rokushima began, "my aunt is asking me if I can hire my cousin to work for me."

Hirosue had still not found a permanent job. Matsuoka was patiently waiting for the man to turn to him for help, unable to bring up the topic himself. He didn't want to keep Rokushima waiting



when he had no idea when Hirosue would come to him for help.

"...Oh, then... please go ahead and hire your cousin."

"I don't want to."

"Huh?" Matsuoka blurted without thinking.

"I don't like that cousin. He's two years older than me, but he's a massive jerk and used to bully the hell out of me when we were kids. I know we're older now, but I still can't stand him. Besides, it's kind of hard telling your relatives what to do, you know."

Rokushima sounded more irritated than ever.

"That's why I kind of slipped and I told her that I've already decided to hire my underclassman's friend."

"What?"

"I had to, or else she wouldn't get off my case. So, what's going on with your friend?"

Matsuoka lowered his head in apology to the invisible person on the other end.

"I'm sorry. I still haven't told him about your firm."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"He's older than me, and... I have a feeling he wouldn't want to get a job referral through a younger guy like me. Once I started thinking about that, I couldn't bring myself to broach the topic to him."

Rokushima seemed to understand his situation.

"Hmm," he grunted thoughtfully. "Well, you're right, that's a difficult spot. I'm sure you've got your social relationships, too. How about this, then? Tell that person you're going to introduce a friend to him, and the three of us can go drinking as a group. That way, I can do an interview of sorts, and if I like him, I'll bring up the topic of the job. You won't have any part in making the offer. Sound good?"

He was right; it was a good idea. This way, Matsuoka wouldn't hurt Hirosue's pride by arranging employment for him, and if Rokushima happened to not like Hirosue and keep quiet about the job offer, Hirosue would be oblivious to it all, which meant he wouldn't get hurt, either. To him, it would just be a night out for drinks. Matsuoka wasted no time in asking for a date that Rokushima was free. After telling Rokushima he would ask for Hirosue's schedule and get back to him later, he hung up his cell phone.

Matsuoka had been concerned that Hirosue hadn't been able to find a job, and now things were finally starting to look like they would work out. Since he had taken a considerable amount of time chatting at the supermarket, Matsuoka hastily finished his shopping and headed to Hirosue's apartment. The master of the house usually came home at irregular hours, but Matsuoka didn't want to make the man wait, just in case he had come home and was hungry.

Matsuoka hurried to get back, but when he arrived, Hirosue didn't appear to be home yet. The window facing the walkway was dark. The next-door neighbour came out of his unit as Matsuoka was unlocking the door. The neighbour was a young man in his mid-twenties. Their eyes met.

"Hello," Matsuoka said for the sake of politeness. The man didn't answer him; in fact, he even knitted his brow in clear displeasure.

*How rude,* Matsuoka thought for an instant, but that was the end of that. When Hirosue came home, he asked about what kind of person the neighbour was. Hirosue said they had only exchanged

greetings when he moved in, and didn't know him too well.

When he brought up the topic of drinks with his upperclassman, Hirose was hesitant.

"Are you sure I can come along?" he said, but in the end, he agreed to go.

The next morning, Matsuoka left Hirose's apartment early. He had stayed the night, but since he didn't have an extra shirt, he needed to go back to his own condo once to change. The man next door appeared to be leaving for work as well, and they came out at almost the exact same time. He was an office worker, too—he was wearing a suit this morning.

Their eyes met, and Matsuoka figured he had perhaps just been in a bad mood yesterday.

"Good morning," he said. The man looked at him but did not speak. Matsuoka decided it was best to leave him alone, and carefully kept a distance as they both went down the stairs. The man stopped halfway and turned around.

"...You guys are really loud at night. Can you cut it out?" he snapped, and descended the rest of the stairs. Matsuoka felt his face burn with embarrassment. He knew the walls were thin, and he was careful with his voice, but he had been careless because they were in a corner suite on the third floor. Sometimes he had also gotten so swept away he couldn't restrain himself. His own condo had better soundproofing, but after Hirose had moved back, more often than not they slept at his place rather than Matsuoka's.

Matsuoka returned to his own condo and changed before heading to the office. The whole time, he still felt like he was being pricked by the words the man had hurled at him, and was restless and uncomfortable.

"Let me hear your voice," the man whispered at his ear, with his desire buried deep inside him and Matsuoka's body in his arms.

"Wh..."

"Let me hear your voice, Matsuoka."

Curtains had finally been put on the windows, and in the dim light of the room, the man stared at him and ran his hand along Matsuoka's forehead. He seemed to have noticed that Matsuoka was trying to suppress his voice.

"I like to hear you moan. It's cute."

Although it was embarrassing to voice his pleasure, Matsuoka didn't dislike it. But right now, there was a more critical problem to worry about.

"Hey, um..."

"What? Are you suddenly getting shy?"

When the man pinched the tip of his aroused and trembling member, Matsuoka let out a short cry that sounded more like one of pain. He hastily covered his mouth with his hands, but Hirose pried them away and pinned them on the sheets.

"Don't, Hirose. My voice'll come out."

"What's wrong with that? It's cute."

The man thrust upwards in that position, and Matsuoka's knees jerked.

"Stop—stop... don't... ah!"

As his back arched, Hirosue sucked the buds on his chest. Matsuoka could not repress the moan that escaped his lips. He was worried about the neighbour, but he could do nothing with both of his hands pinned down.

"Ah—ah—no...! Stop—st... Hirosue...!"

It was hard to tell whether he was moaning or cautioning the man. After a while, a loud bang sounded from the wall beside them. Hirosue turned around, startled, and Matsuoka's spine flinched.

"What was that? Making such a racket in the middle of the night," Hirosue murmured, seemingly unconcerned. In contrast, Matsuoka felt his feverish mood instantly recede. If they stayed joined like this any longer, he felt like the oblivious man would make him cry out to high heaven. Matsuoka shifted his hips and undid their connection.

"Huh?" A pitiful expression crossed Hirosue's face. It was no wonder; neither of them had climaxed once yet.

"Sorry. Can I do it by hand?" Matsuoka asked hesitantly.

"Oh... sure," Hirosue answered, but suddenly went silent. When Matsuoka stroked him with his hand, it took a little longer, but Hirosue still eventually came. Matsuoka was relieved until Hirosue's hand reached down towards his lower parts as well.

"I—I'm fine. Don't."

"Why not?"

"Just not today."

Despite Matsuoka's refusal, his groin was still half-erect. He couldn't just leave it like that, so he stood up to take care of himself in the bathroom. Hirosue, sensing his movement, stopped him.

"Let me do it," he said.

"I'll do it on my own today."

Hirosue looked steadily at Matsuoka, then apologized.

"I'm sorry."

"Huh? What?"

"I'm sorry, so please don't be angry with me. I won't do anything you don't like anymore."

"I'm not angry."

"You *are* angry," Hirosue insisted. Matsuoka really wasn't, but the man didn't believe him. There was a stubborn, sullen look in his eyes. Matsuoka didn't want the man to sulk over something like this, and to be honest, he wanted Hirosue to touch him. But he was also just as apprehensive that their voices could be heard next door at this time of the night.

Matsuoka grabbed Hirosue's hand, pulled him out of the sheets, and led him to the doorway, still stark naked. It was a little cold.

"It's not that I don't like having sex."

"Then why?"

He shivered, and gave a sneeze. He sniffled, thinking he should have thrown something over himself before coming out here. Just then, he was drawn close. It began to feel warmer where they touched. Matsuoka had figured it was just a matter of him being careful, but Hirosue would probably not be convinced unless he knew the reason why.

"...My voice..."

"Hm?"

"The neighbour complained that our... voices are too loud when we do it."

It seemed to be a bolt out of the blue for Hirosue; he looked like he hadn't expected it at all.

"That's why I think we should be a little careful when we do it here," Matsuoka added.

The arms around him tightened.

"I'm sorry for making you worry over that," Hirosue apologized.

"It's not... I'm totally fine."

Hirosue gave him smacking kisses before running his hand carefully over his head. Matsuoka felt glad that he had been honest.

"Does that mean we should start going to your place when we do it?"

True, his condo had better soundproofing than here, but after so many days of coming to this apartment, Matsuoka had come to quite like this cramped room.

"I just have to be careful, that's all."

"But that means I have to hold myself in, too."

Matsuoka was always the one who was crying and moaning at Hirosue's hands. Matsuoka tilted his head curiously at the man's words.

"I'll have to hold myself in from wanting to hear you voice, Matsuoka."

So that was what he had meant. Matsuoka felt his ears burn.

"If you don't want people to hear your voice, then—" Hirosue murmured, then kissed him.

The tip of Hirosue's tongue entered his mouth, dominating him and reduced him to submission. As Matsuoka swooned, Hirosue reached down to fondle his half-erect member.

Matsuoka's body grew hot at the man's touch while they kissed. Hirosue rubbed the tip, sending a tingling jolt racing through his whole body, and before he knew it, Matsuoka had ejaculated. Since he hadn't been able to let Hirosue know, the man hadn't been able to catch it in his hand. Matsuoka's desire ended up splattering.

"Oh, sorry..." The fluid residue dripping down Hirosue's thigh looked vivid and repulsive to him.

"It's warm, Matsuoka," Hirosue murmured as he swabbed the dripping liquid with the tip of his finger and licked it without the slightest hesitation. Matsuoka had had a feeling that the man occasionally swallowed when Matsuoka came inside his mouth, but he had never bothered to check.

Hirosue looked at him as he licked his lips. Matsuoka hastily averted his eyes. He then looked at the ground, wondering if this man had always been this erotic.

After the incident with the neighbour, this time it was Hirosue's turn to practically live at Matsuoka's apartment. He had never had many belongings in the first place, so he began to leave Matsuoka's apartment and come back again without returning to his own place at all. They were practically like newlyweds who had moved in with each other.

Although Matsuoka had started cooking because he wanted to save money on food, he was starting to rather enjoy it. The thought that he was cooking for two and not just for himself motivated him even more.

When Matsuoka cooked, Hirose cleaned up afterwards. Hirose also did the laundry and cleaned the house when he had some time after coming home from his part-time job. Although they had never said discussed it, they naturally began to divide household tasks between them.

The man was now clinging to him, fast asleep; while patting him gently, Matsuoka was never more thankful that this man was so awkward. If he had been more fastidious and careful about his appearance on top of everything he was now, Matsuoka figured there was no way he would still be single at this age.

The incident with the man at Hirose's apartment had served a good excuse for him to come here. Matsuoka felt like in the near future—just not yet, perhaps—he would be able to naturally suggest to Hirose, "Why don't you move out of your apartment and come here?"

One day, about midway through November, Matsuoka had a lot of work to get done last-minute, and when he left the office to have lunch it was a little past twelve.

He ran into Shinozaki at the entrance on the first floor. Shinozaki also said he was going to lunch, so they decided to go to a set-meal restaurant nearby. *Donburi*<sup>5</sup> were the focus of the menu here, and Matsuoka ordered raw tuna on rice while Shinozaki ordered a breaded pork cutlet on rice.

"Say, Chief, are you still doing well with that long-distance girlfriend of yours?" Shinozaki spoke up abruptly while he sipped his glass of self-serve water.

"Actually, we're not long-distance anymore. She came out to the city."

"...I knew it." Shinozaki nodded with conviction.

"What do you mean, you knew it?"

"She probably started getting insecure over your long-distance relationship. You're prime boyfriend material as it is, Chief. She probably came out so she could put up a shield around you. Keep those pesky girls from getting close."

"...I suppose that's one way to think about it," Matsuoka grinned humorously.

"It has to be," Shinozaki emphasized. "This is serious, Chief. Now there's no way out for you. What're you gonna do if she tells you to take responsibility and marry her?"

"I'd be happy to."

"Oh, man. Absolutely hopeless," Shinozaki sighed.

"No need to be unpleasant about it," Matsuoka remarked.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean anything between you and your girlfriend, Chief. I was just thinking now that this girl—a fan of yours—probably doesn't have anything going for her anymore. I knew you were pretty serious when you mentioned that you cook, Chief, but..."

Uemura rose briefly in his mind. Was Shinozaki talking about her? Matsuoka did have a feeling that she liked him, but he had pretended not to notice. There was no need to ask unless the other end brought it up first.

"If your girlfriend's come out to the city, does that mean you're living together?"

"Well, she rented a place, too, so we're not actually living together. But I guess it's getting close to that."

"Have you started to see the harsh face of reality?"

"Harsh?" Matsuoka cocked his head.

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5 A large bowl with a bed of rice, topped with various combinations of meat, fish, eggs, and/or vegetables.

"Things you find unpleasant about your girlfriend, or annoying things."

"Not so far. I'm the one who cooks, but she cleans and does the laundry."

"Uh-huh," Shinozaki grunted in response. "You know, I can't imagine you being all mushy towards your girlfriend. Do you guys take baths together and stuff?"

There was a slight pause before he answered. Shinozaki widened his eyes in surprise, even though he had asked the question.

"Wait—you do?"

"N-No, we don't! My bath is tiny, anyway."

Actually, they bathed together every night because Hirosue said he wanted to. It was cramped and confined, and it was certainly more relaxing to bathe alone; but now that he was used to it, Matsuoka began to feel lonely by himself.

He knew a romantic relationship was not all about the physical things, but that was definitely one of the supporting pillars of a relationship. At first, Matsuoka had been afraid and reluctant to let Hirosue see his body. But now, he was happy to be looked at, and he even felt the desire to be touched more. —He was still, however, not so enthusiastic about doing it inside the bathtub.

"You're a pretty kinky guy, aren't you, Chief?"

"It's not what you think."

Shinozaki's eyes still danced in a perverted way.

"Really. It's not. Don't you dare tell anyone else."

"You got it," Shinozaki answered, but with his last warning, Matsuoka knew he had pretty much affirmed Shinozaki's suspicions. "Well, it looks like smooth sailing on your end, Chief. I, on the other hand, broke up with my girlfriend the other day," he said casually. "I got to know this cute girl at a group date, and my girlfriend found out I was cheating on her. Now, I'm dating the girl from the group date."

Although Shinozaki was a chatterbox, he also ate quickly. Soon, he had polished off his pork cutlet bowl and was taking out a cigarette to light it.

"Once she found out I was cheating, I was kicked to the curb faster than anything. Our relationship was already getting a little stale, anyway, but there was nothing really decisive to end it. As for me, I thought maybe... you know, I just had the feeling that we'd eventually get married. So when this happened, I realized, oh, this must have been her big red button. I was pretty depressed."

"But now you're dating that girl you met at the group date, right?"

"Well, yeah. But still." Shinozaki lit his second cigarette. He looked somewhat listless.

In the evening, Matsuoka quickly wrapped up his work and headed to the park where they were supposed to meet. Hirosue was already there, sitting on a bench and waiting for him. He was wearing what he would usually wear at home: a thick long-sleeve shirt and jeans, with a cotton coat over stop. Since today's dinner was going to double as an interview, Matsuoka sort of wished he had come in a suit, but there was no way Hirosue would worry about his clothes to that extent when he thought it was just dinner and drinks.

"Did I make you wait?"

"I just got here." Hirosue was still smiling as he got up from the bench.

"My upperclassman is going to be a little late. He said we could go on ahead to the restaurant."

Matsuoka ushered Hirosue on, and they headed to the restaurant. It was an *izakaya* with an Asian vibe, and had private booths. Matsuoka got an e-mail from his upperclassman as soon as they sat down. Rokushima said he was going to be twenty more minutes late, so Matsuoka and Hirosue decided to start on some drinks.

Matsuoka ate mostly at home now; the last time he had gone to an *izakaya* was the time he went for drinks with people from his office. Now that he had started cooking dinner for himself, Matsuoka also became curious about the seasonings used in the dishes served at restaurants, and ended up asking their server about all sorts of things. He was just about to order another beer when he noticed Hirosue wasn't drinking much. Matsuoka was on his third beer, but Hirosue still had half of his first glass left.

"You don't have to hold yourself back," Matsuoka told him.

"But I'll be meeting your upperclassman for the first time. I don't want to be drunk before he even gets here."

"He's not the type of person who'd get hung up about that. It's alright."

While they were talking, Matsuoka thought he heard his upperclassman's voice. He turned out to be right. Rokushima was being led towards them by the server.

"Hey, Matsuoka."

"It's been a... not-that-long-of-a-while, actually."

Rokushima turned to Hirosue and lowered his head apologetically. "I'm sorry I'm late," he said.

"Not at all," Hirosue said, inclining his own head.

"This assignment I've taken on is pretty complicated. It's just been causing me a huge hassle. I'm pooped." Rokushima sat down beside Matsuoka as he spoke. Matsuoka wasted no time in introducing Hirosue and Rokushima to each other, but he deliberately kept Rokushima's profession under wraps. Rokushima seemed to pick up the hint, for their conversation only dwelt on harmless topics such as celebrities and current events.

Hirosue appeared reserved around Rokushima, whom he was meeting for the first time, and he did not take part in their conversation much. But he still responded if the topic was directed at him. Hirosue had never been the type to assert himself over others, anyway, so Matsuoka felt like maybe this was normal.

The topic turned to soccer, and Rokushima spoke about how he had even gone to the stadium to cheer at a game on a weekday. Hirosue tilted his head slightly.

"What kind of work do you do, Mr. Rokushima?"

After throwing a glance at Matsuoka, Rokushima spoke. "I'm a lawyer," he admitted.

"Ah, a lawyer. I see," Hirosue responded conversationally, but went no further.

"What do you do, Mr. Hirosue?"

Matsuoka winced. Even though he had already told him that Hirosue was out of a job, Rokushima pointedly chose to question him about it.

After a slight pause, Hirosue responded honestly.

"...To tell you the truth, I'm actually out of a job right now. I'm looking for one."

"That's gotta be hard," Rokushima said, giving an exaggerated nod. "Did you quit on your

own?" Rokushima continued to jab his feelers into what Matsuoka least wanted him to ask.

"...No. I was given my notice in February of this year, and at the end of March I was officially laid off. If I could, I would have wanted to stay, but with these things there's simply nothing I can do."

"That's pretty sudden. Didn't you try to negotiate with your company?"

"I didn't; not personally. It seems like my boss tried to talk to the higher-ups about it, but..."

"Hmmm," Rokushima made a rumbling in his throat and folded his arms. "You know, you might be able to take your company to court over this," he said, leaning forward. Hirosue shook his head hastily.

"It's alright. I don't think I was the most competent employee, either. And I don't have the finances to go to court. I'm better off working part-time or something," Hirosue smiled. He didn't look bitter or self-derogatory. Matsuoka had thought he might get offended from the topic of his layoff, but Hirosue showed no signs of it. He stated the truth in a calm, objective manner.

After that, the topic drifted away from Hirosue. Rokushima spoke about an outrageous client who came to his firm, and Matsuoka clutched his sides laughing. Hirosue was laughing, too.

In the midst of it, they heard a cell phone ringing.

"Excuse me for a minute," Rokushima said, getting up from his seat. Matsuoka also got up to go to the washroom. On his way back to his seat, he ran into Rokushima in the hallway, who had apparently come in from talking outside.

"I like your friend," Rokushima murmured.

"He's not a smooth talker, but he's sincere, isn't he?"

"Sure is. Gotta be pretty damn honest to talk about getting laid off to someone you've never met." Rokushima headed towards the washroom, saying he might as well stop by on the way. Matsuoka went on ahead back to the table. Hirosue was peering at his cell phone screen, but when Matsuoka came back, he closed it with a snap.

"What do you think of Rokushima?" Rokushima's impression of Hirosue was important, but Matsuoka also wanted to know what kind of impression Hirosue had of him.

"What do I think? Well... I guess he's a funny person," Hirosue said hesitantly.

"Does he seem like a crazy soccer fanatic to you?"

Hirosue laughed. "I think it's good to have something to be passionate about no matter how old you get."

"Oh, are you guys talking about me?" Rokushima was back before they even knew it. As soon as he sat down, he flagged a passing server. "One more draft beer," he ordered. "Oh, right, so, Mr. Hirosue. You mentioned you were looking for a job. Any prospects of one?" Rokushima finally brought the topic up. Hirosue was smiling sheepishly.

"I admit it's pretty difficult. But I hear if people my age want to find re-employment, they'd have to go to as many interviews as the number of years they've lived, so..."

"Well, you see, a girl at my firm is quitting at the end of this year. If you don't mind, Mr. Hirosue, how would you like to work at my place?"

Hirosue widened his eyes in surprise.

"But... but I don't know much about law."

"That's fine. It's just a clerical position, so you won't need to be an expert."



Hirosue still looked agitated as he closed his mouth and looked down. It was a good offer. Matsuoka watched Hirosue's expression closely, hoping he wouldn't refuse.

Hirosue abruptly raised his face again. Their eyes met. He looked steadily at Matsuoka. Matsuoka felt like his gaze looked somewhat angry, and felt a frightening chill race up his spine.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to force you," Rokushima added, as the silence wore on to the point of being awkward.

"...No." Matsuoka could detect Hirosue's tone dropping slightly. "I've been searching high and low for a job, so I'm really thankful for your offer. I was in General Affairs at my former company, so if you're looking for a clerk, my experience might come in useful somehow."

His voice was stiff, but his utterance itself was that of affirmation.

"So, you'll take it?"

"By all means, if you're willing to have me."

The direction of their conversation was what Matsuoka had hoped for. Hirosue had also accepted it of his own accord. But Matsuoka still could not look him in the face—he was too afraid to.

They parted with Rokushima in front of the restaurant. Their discussion after that progressed smoothly, and Hirosue was now set to show up once a week at Rokushima's firm starting in December as a part-time clerk-in-training.

They walked side-by-side on the way home, but neither of them spoke a word. Hirosue only looked straight ahead, and did not look at Matsuoka. Everything about his demeanour said 'Don't talk to me' and there was no way Matsuoka could say anything with this air between them.

Hirosue was still silent after they got on the train. Matsuoka felt like his stomach was twisting into painful knots. He was genuinely relieved when Hirosue did not get off at the station before his; Matsuoka had been afraid that he would head straight back home to his own apartment.

They got off the train at the station close to Matsuoka's condo. The silence still dragged on between them, and Matsuoka fell a little behind because walking side-by-side was getting painful.

Hirosue stopped in his tracks right before the convenience store.

"I have something I want to buy. You can go on ahead." The tone of his voice seemed no different from the usual.

"Oh, then I'll get something..."

Hirosue suddenly fell silent. It was then that Matsuoka finally realized that the stop was Hirosue's excuse to be by himself.

"...I'm a little drunk, so I'm going to take a bit of a walk in the park before I go home."

"Uh. Right. I'll go on ahead, then." Despite having said so, Matsuoka's feet did not move, which prevented him from heading home. Hirosue was clearly angry. If he left the man behind here, he felt like Hirosue would go back to the countryside like last time. Even though he knew it was impossible because the bullet trains weren't running at this hour, he was still afraid.

He remembered the topic about the big red button that Shinozaki had mentioned during the day—that one thing that you could never touch, never overstep, even if you were dating. Something that, by itself alone, was enough to end the relationship.

Hirosue no doubt knew that Matsuoka had set up this employment offer. After all, Matsuoka had already mentioned the same thing to Hirosue before, that an upperclassman at a law firm was looking for someone. It was only natural that Hirosue would sense some contrivance from that. Matsuoka had been too occupied about immediate appearances; he had thought it would be alright as long as he wasn't the one arranging the employment. It was his mistake for not thinking far enough.

And now, he had without a doubt pressed the button that Hirosue did not want anyone to touch.

"....I'm sorry." Unable to bear it any longer, Matsuoka apologized.

"Why are you apologizing?" Hirosue asked, in a voice so cold it made Matsuoka shudder. Hirosue continued without waiting for his answer. "Because you arranged a job for me disguised as dinner and drinks?"

"I'm so sorry."

Hirosue sighed, exuding a thick aura of irritation.

"I'll see you at home." With those words, Hirosue crossed at the lights. The park was off the path that led to Matsuoka's house. Matsuoka stood stock-still until Hirosue's figure disappeared into the distance, and began to drag his feet home. His feet felt unbearably heavy, as if someone had shackled them.

Upon returning to his apartment, Matsuoka crumpled to his knees in the doorway. His whole mind was pitch-black. Hirosue was not coming home. Matsuoka was almost sure he wouldn't, and he was riddled with despair. Things had been going so well, and he had ruined it all. He had torn it apart.

After sitting in the doorway for a while, Matsuoka finally took off his shoes. He walked to the living room, and collapsed into the sofa.

*"It's over. It's over. It's over."*

The words spun in his head at breakneck speed, and there was a burning pain in his chest. Unable to stay still, Matsuoka thought about running to the park and getting down on his knees to apologize to Hirosue. But if the man still told him it was over after that, he felt like he would never be able to recover.

He wished he could might as well die. He wished a burglar would break in and murder him. Then, Hirosue would see him dead and regret ever letting him come home alone. Although this far from solved the problem, Matsuoka honestly wished it would happen.

He should have turned Rokushima down upfront when he first brought up the topic. Hirosue had been working hard on his own to find a new job. All Matsuoka should have done was watch him benevolently from afar. Hirosue had sought comfort when he was gloomy from being rejected, but he had never asked for more than that.

If he were to be completely honest, Matsuoka did not care whether Hirosue was employed or not. If the man would be with him, that was enough.

Regret filled every corner of his mind, leaving no space for anything else. Matsuoka ran to the fridge. He took out a beer, and drank even though he didn't want to. He wanted to get drunk as quickly as he could so he could lose his senses and be rescued from this situation. He had just reached for his third beer when he heard the front door open.

There was only one person who owned the spare key to this apartment. Footsteps drew nearer, and stopped before Matsuoka, who was sitting on the sofa with a can of beer in hand.

"...I'm home," Hirosue said with his proper manners, but there was something grim about his expression. He let out a sigh between compressed lips, which felt like a stab to Matsuoka's ears.

Hirosue sat down beside Matsuoka.

"I'm... sorry..." Matsuoka apologized as he clutched his can of beer, unable to look at the man's face.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"I'm sorry..." Tears spilled from his eyes. He knew he would only annoy Hirosue by bawling over something like this, but he couldn't stop.

A set of fingers touched his cheek, and gently wiped the edge of Matsuoka's eye.

"I knew something was up the moment you said you wanted to introduce me to a friend. Next time, I want you to tell me outright instead of doing something roundabout like this—just ask me if I want to work at your friend's firm."

Matsuoka turned to him.

"But you don't like to hear it from me. Last time... y-you got angry about that and packed up to go to the country."

"Well, yeah, but..." Hirosue murmured. "That time, I was at the end of my emotional rope, too. I still thought it was unfair that I had to quit, and it made me feel even worse to see you get promoted. I felt like our differences were being rubbed in my face. But now I know I don't need to compare myself to anyone, so I'm not going to get angry."

"But you *are* angry. You barely talked to me on the way home, and you had this scary look in your eyes and face."

Matsuoka flinched as Hirosue pulled him roughly into his arms.

"I am angry, but not at you, Matsuoka."

The man held him close even though he was angry, and Matsuoka wasn't sure anymore whether he was happy or afraid.

"I love you, Matsuoka. I know you love me, too, but you don't have faith in me, do you?"

"I—I'm sor..."

"You don't have to apologize. It's my fault that you can't have faith in me. It makes me feel so ashamed of myself and... angry."

"It's not your f—" he tried to apologize before he was stopped with a kiss. Was Hirosue telling him not to say any more? As the man groped him, he began to feel aroused as well as afraid and sad. His mind was a mess.

"You can be more angry at me, you know." Hirosue looked steadily into Matsuoka's eyes. "If there's something you don't like about me, say so. If something's bothering you, say so. I'll do my best to fix it, and if I have an argument to make, I'll make it. I won't get angry or hate you just because we have different opinions. And Matsuoka, you should feel more free to be selfish around me."

The pair of eyes on him softened into a gentle smile.

"I want to see what it's like to feel daunted from a selfish request from you."

Matsuoka half-trembled as he shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

"If I say it, you'll get put off."

"I'll try my best, no matter how outrageous it is. For example," he whispered, "if you want to have sex all day..."

Matsuoka's emotions were yanked back to reality. *That's not selfishness, that's just your wishful thinking*, he remarked inwardly. *Would you honestly say something like that? At a time like this?* It was so much like Hirosue to say something totally inappropriate for the situation. Matsuoka couldn't help but find it funny.

Still laughing, Matsuoka wound his arms around Hirosue's neck and pressed his nose against the man's collarbone.

"Can you move out of your apartment?" his voice trembled. He couldn't look the man in the face. "I want you to live here with me... together. Please."

*Please*, he begged silently once more, and tightened his arms around the other man.

"... But I'm still a bum out of a job. Is that okay with you?" Hirosue said in a teasing voice.

"Yeah," Matsuoka trembled as he answered.

Starting in December, Hirosue began to work at Rokushima's firm as a part-time worker. During lunch break, Matsuoka was wondering how Hirosue was doing on his first day on the job when he got a phone call from Rokushima.

"Hey, Mr. Hirosue's great," Rokushima enthused, his voice unusually buoyant. "He's done it, and it's only his first day! He went up to that girl who's quitting to get married and straight-out told her she should stop sending personal texts during work. She was all, 'it's nothing to worry about because I don't send that many,' but he was all, 'even so, it's common etiquette as a working adult,' and, boy, was that exhilarating!"

Hirosue's uprightness was nothing new, but Matsuoka was relieved to know it seemed to be taking him in a positive direction.

The clerk quit at the end of December, and Hirosue was happily hired as a permanent, full-time worker starting in January.

Hirosue claimed there were still a lot of things he didn't understand, and was often seen studying legal matters at home.

In March, Matsuoka bumped into Rokushima on the way home from work. Although Hirosue occasionally spoke to him about the firm, he decided to ask Rokushima in person as well.

"Mr. Hirosue's a good worker," Rokushima told him. "At first I thought maybe he was a little slow, but he doesn't make mistakes, so I can leave him in charge of stuff without any worries. I have no idea why he got laid off, really. Well, at least that means I get to have him. —There's just one thing," Rokushima said ruefully. "He's inflexible, that one. I have a hard time getting him to approve my expenses. One time I was begging him to process this thing as a business expense, and he had this grave expression on his face and he said, 'don't do anything that you feel even slightly guilty about,' and all. I know he's right. But still."

"I told you Hirosue's upright," Matsuoka said.

"He's a good guy and I have no complaints. I just think people should be allowed to bend the

rules sometimes, you know what I mean?"

Matsuoka parted with Rokushima after that and boarded the train. An e-mail arrived on his cell phone. It was from Hirose.

*'I finished work early, so I'll make dinner tonight. What do you feel like eating?'* it said.

If people were cut out for certain things and not for others, Hirose was clearly not cut out for cooking, and neither was he good at it. Despite that, he bravely kept attempting to cook, which was cute but also a slight nuisance. Matsuoka decided to request curry. No matter how atrocious one's cooking skills were, curry was bound to be palatable once the *roux* was thrown in.

*'I'll try my best,'* came Hirose's response, and Matsuoka gave a little smile.